

**THE COMMANDMENT
OF MOSES**

By STEPHEN McKENNA



NOVELS:

VINDICATION

THE COMMANDMENT OF MOSES

SOLILOQUY

THE CONFESSIONS OF A WELL-MEANING
WOMAN

THE SENSATIONALISTS:

I *Lady Lilith*

II *The Education of Eric Lane*

III *The Secret Victory*

SONIA MARRIED

MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

SONIA

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHELLA INTERVENES

THE RELUCTANT LOVER

BY INTERVENTION OF PROVIDENCE

WHILE I REMEMBER

TEX: A CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF
ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

THE COMMANDMENT OF MOSES

A NOVEL

BY
STEPHEN McKENNA



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TO
E. D.

“Then ye shall bring them both out
unto the gate of that city, and ye shall
stone them with stones that they die . . .”

Deuteronomy: XXII, 24

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THE COMMANDMENT OF MOSES

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

ONE OF COLONEL ANKER'S FRIENDS

MAURYA: "It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time, surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking."

—J. M. SYNGE: *Riders to the Sea*.

AS Joan Prendergast signed her name in the attendance book and looked up through the November fog at the clock over the door of her department, the distant voice of a park-keeper, booming above the thick patter of rain on swirling leaves, warned her that the gates were being closed.

"And now these poor girls will have to go right round by the Ministry of Shipping," she reflected sympathetically.

For herself, so long as she reached her rooms with twenty minutes to dress for dinner, the hour was of no

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more account than the weather : at the first rattle of rain on their corrugated-iron roof, Captain Henson, detailed for light duty at War Office Extension L A 7 and privileged, by reason of a shattered leg, to come and go in a car, had asked leave to drive her back to Duke Street. The light from his head-lamps glimmered through the crack of the swing doors, while, in the messengers' waiting-room, a shivering W.A.A.C. driver held her drenched gloves to the gas-ring on which the kettles were boiled for tea.

"If he'd drop some of the others at their tubes and let me walk . . ." Joan continued.

Then she broke off with a frown at her own timidity and other people's silly ideas of dignity. The flamboyant Miss Fawley, though deputy-head of the index-room, was only a second-division clerk; pretty, confiding Miss Pearson was no more than head telephone-operator; and the social position of Mrs. Ranger, though she was female-establishment-officer with powers of discharge, remained ambiguous. Captain Henson never had driven them home; and Joan was afraid to ask him. Vividly conscious of her youth and desperately anxious to please, she was not sure how far his authority over her extended nor when he was quietly laughing at her with his talk of military discipline. The life of a government department was still, after twelve months, very bewildering to a girl of nineteen who had spent three years in Paris and fifteen in a schoolroom.

But for these forbidding social distinctions, Joan would have made friends with every one. Though she was supposed to be much in demand after office hours, there were long spells of loneliness and anxiety when she yearned to talk with a girl of her own age; and,

the more friends one had, the more one could expend oneself upon them. As general slave to three brothers and peacemaker to three sisters older than herself, she had learned a thousand things about people's likes and dislikes.

Nobody liked getting wet, for example. These girls had to walk nightly to the Piccadilly Tube Station, to stand for half an hour in steaming, malodorous lifts and trains, to scramble for places in crowded trams and then to walk through more slush to their homes. The rain falling on ambitious furs and the mud working into recklessly thin shoes were of almost vital importance, as Joan had discovered after listening for the first time to the conversation in the cloak-room. Looking down the long vista of frosted electric-globes and red fire-buckets, she saw the same consternation assailing one girl after another as they bustled over the cocoanut-matting of the central corridor, linking arms, whispering, stepping aside to avoid the brooms and pails of the charwomen and, finally, collecting their dignity to bow and murmur:

"Good-night, Miss Prendergast."

"Good-night, Miss Pearson," Joan answered.

"Good-night, Miss Fawley. Good-night, Mrs. Ranger. Another terribly wet evening, I'm afraid."

"Ah, well, we shan't have much more of it here," opined Miss Pearson, whose widely-canvassed engagement to an infantry officer entitled her to be accepted as an oracle on the war and as an arbiter of life and sex in the canteen. "They're on the run now, Miss Prendergast, properly. This old office will be closed down by Christmas, you see."

"I hope so," Joan sighed; "though that's eight weeks away."

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"And, when we *do* close down, it may not be so easy for some of you girls to find another job," said Mrs. Ranger with morose satisfaction.

"Well, I shan't mind a bit of a holiday. Good times coming when the war's over," Miss Fawley predicted knowingly.

"You and your good times!" sniffed Miss Pearson in virtuous reprobation, as she laid down the pen and held open the swing doors for her allies.

"It's all talk, my dear," answered Mrs. Ranger in a faintly contemptuous voice that faded from hearing as they splashed into the night. "She *likes* to make herself out worse than she is." . . .

"Well, all I can tell you . . ." began Miss Fawley in blissfully wicked certainty that she had concentrated their interest upon herself.

As the door swung to, Joan tried to picture the homes to which these women retired when they left their tubes and trams. A year before, her experience had been restricted to one social class; and, for the first weeks of work, her incurable friendliness had been chilled by the pertness and occasional vulgarity of her colleagues; their voices were indefinably harsh, their self-consciousness gave them no peace; and in office, canteen and cloak-room they revealed in giggling whispers their eternal preoccupation with their personal adornment and with its probable effect on every man in the department, from messenger to director.

Heartily ashamed of her own narrowness, Joan was delighted to find herself being drawn into at least a surface friendship with women whom she quickly learned to respect. Sharing the same heat and cold, swaggering or cowering through the same daylight air-raids, shouldering one another's work in the periodical epi-

demics of influenza, they struck through their discords to a deeper harmony; and, as though all had been waiting for some one to idolize, Joan woke one day to find herself the favourite of the department. Eyes softened when she came into a room, shy, quick to colour and disarmingly young. The blunders of inexperience were excused by her immense gravity and zeal. At night, one little figure or another, jealously taking its turn, would emerge from the trees and walk with her to the Duke of York's steps; her opinion was sought on tremendous trivialities; and: "*Miss Prendergast says . . .*" ushered in the judgement of the last court of appeal.

Severely trained at home to realize her own insignificance, Joan never dreamed that she was the model for the three girls in the index-room who bobbed their hair in flattering imitation; and, sitting alone by the attendance-book in the draughty hall, she canvassed means of overcoming the barrier that still kept her isolated. So far, she had never been asked to explore, on a Sunday, where the tubes and tram-lines ran out; and, sensitive to embarrassment on both sides, she had not invited her colleagues to visit her in Duke Street. Among them it was whispered with awe that, when the day's work was over, she went back to a life that in their eyes seemed glittering and enviable; they persisted in thinking of her as a being of some superior species who unbent with charming condescension; and Miss Pearson once broke the seal of the private exchange to tell Miss Fawley that two lords had telephoned on the same day and that Joan had addressed them both by their Christian names.

"They don't see that I'm more like themselves than they are," Joan sighed . . . and then smiled at the

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elegance of her English. "I should think that, to ninety-nine out of a hundred of them, the war's been a perfect god-send. Pocket-money . . . an escape from home . . . independence . . . a chance of meeting people. . . . All that seems to fit me. . . . '*They're on the run now, Miss Prendergast, properly,*'" she repeated to herself.

But for a promise to help in amusing some young officers on leave, she would have liked to ask little Miss Pearson to dine at her club. To belong to a club still sounded deliciously important; and she wanted to hear about this man whose photograph and ring had been secretly exhibited to every one who would look at them. Miss Pearson's soul, Joan knew, was brooding on him all the time that her brain and fingers patiently connected "extension one-two" with "extension one-double-nine." Night and day, night and day, she prayed for him, as another woman—debarred by circumstances and tradition from shewing a ring or photograph—might pray for the safe return of Curtis Anker. Though the confidences would be one-sided, Joan knew that she could fit to Curtis and herself all that Miss Pearson might tell her of herself and Mr. Logan Praed, as, a hundred times already, she had fitted a play or novel to her own life till Curtis became the essential and abiding protagonist of every romance and of all love. When little Miss Pearson prattled of her "boy's" approaching leave, of his last bout of fighting, of their rainbow plans for the future, Joan could smile in tender sympathy as she thought of the daily letters in which Curtis lived again through his last leave and projected himself into the next, with a jest at his own share in the grim business of war

and a rainbow dream of the days that awaited them when the Germans should have asked for an armistice.

"They're on the run now." . . .

Curtis had used the same phrase, in a letter that came to Joan at breakfast and was reread whenever she could secure a moment to herself; her other letters, still unopened, were somewhere in the Duke Street rooms, tossed aside till she could scrutinize the one blurred date and assure herself that he had survived another night and day. For twenty-four hours she was absolved from searching the "roll of honour." If he, if all of them who wrote exultantly of the German collapse, were justified in their optimism, the day was not far distant when she would be able to read *The Times* of a morning without a thumping heart . . . or to leave it unread . . . when she could cease dining out to kill thought and give up this maddening pretence that she was anything but wild with fear until the sight of his handwriting brought the blood back to her lips.

There was still no sign of Captain Henson; and Joan guardedly drew the last letter from its hiding-place:

"They're on the run now. I've laid five to three in hundreds that they ask for an armistice before Christmas. I've two bets on an even hundred that they'll ask for it before the beginning of December. And, then, my blessed child . . ."

Then he had gone on to speak of the life that lay before them; and, in a postscript, he had touched falteringly on the one subject that always set them at variance. As Beatrice still refused to shew her hand,

he proposed, on his return to England, formally to tell her that she had better sue for restitution of conjugal rights; there was enough money for her to make a new life for herself, there were no children to embarrass either of them, and the decree was assured to her as soon as he had supplied technical evidence of infidelity. . . .

"But, as I've told you again and again, darling Joan," he wrote, "I can't see what good we do by bringing your name in. Neither Beatrice nor any one else has the least suspicion; and, though I cannot help admiring your pluck, I don't think you realize how dearly you may have to pay for this frankness all your life. It's a thing that will always be remembered against you. There would be more force in your point if we defied the world and ran away together; but you know as well as I do that we've been heartbreakingly discreet, and I can't see why you want to throw away the fruits of our discretion when I'm perfectly capable of standing the racket single-handed." . . .

Joan restored the letter to its place and fell to thinking how she could convince Curtis of the need for candour. It was wonderful to be praised for pluck by the bravest man in the British Army, though he might—with equal justice—have praised her for having three hands. If any one had told her two years earlier that she would leave home, on the plea of doing war-work in London, to live secretly with a married man, Joan would possibly have felt insulted, probably shocked; and certainly she would have been incredulous. Not even Curtis, with all his tenderness and understanding, could realize how hard she had strug-

gled against him to keep herself from sin; and she had never been able to explain how her conception of sin had changed. One day in church she had hidden her face at the injunction "*Thou shalt not commit adultery*"; the minister's ringing voice seemed the echo or forerunner of God's. A week later Curtis was waiting for her at Paddington; and, between, there had been an indescribable illumination of spirit to shew her that she was frustrating the very purpose of life every hour that she resisted. Had there been no war, she would have waited till Curtis was free; but this was a triviality for pedant lawyers, when once she had admitted the jurisdiction of love. In love—she now understood for the first time how God was love—the only sin was cruelty; and they were hurting no one. Later, as they masked their love, she wondered whether they were not hurting themselves. Innocent of sin, she did not wish to be preserved from scandal; and, glorying in his love, she wanted only to share with Curtis the struggle by which their love must be maintained.

A door slammed at the end of the corridor and she saw Captain Henson hobbling to her on two sticks. Though she could not adduce him as an additional argument against Curtis, Joan never accepted one of his thousand small kindnesses without feeling that she was in a false position. When Alec Henson drove her to and from the office on wet days or sent her home at the first irrepressible sign of fatigue, he shewed a consideration that was seldom extended to clerks who brought him wrong files or to typists who corrected his punctuation by canons of their own. Unless Curtis made the announcement for her, she might

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some day have to warn Henson that they could never be more than friends.

"I'm *really* not to blame for keeping you waiting!" he cried. "The Ministry of Munitions, with its usual perverted humour, thought that 6.45 pip emma, without a shorthand-writer on the horizon, was a suitable moment for demanding a four-page minute on our old friend the Ackroyd business; and as I had to make two copies . . ."

"But you've not done that yourself?" exclaimed Joan, breaking through the opening engagement of an unending inter-departmental warfare. "When I was standing here, doing nothing . . .?"

"I thought you'd done enough for one day," he answered softly as he bent over the attendance-book.

"I call that . . . *mean*," said Joan hotly.

"If you talk like that, I shall send you home to-morrow at five." Henson paused as his driver emerged from the waiting-room and held open the door for them. "Tell me, am I right in thinking you're dining with Hilda Ferguson to-night? Well, may I pick you up on my way there?"

"It'd be most awfully kind of you."

"Excellent! And I hope she'll put us together."

As the car stopped in Duke Street, he scrambled out, regardless of her entreaties, and stood waiting to lend her a hand. Even in the misty light of a muffled street-lamp, she could see that he was wincing from the violence done to a tangle of displaced muscles; but it was his obstinate foible to pretend that he was insensitive, even as it was hers to pretend that she was fearless.

"I'll meet you at eight, down here," Joan promised, as he climbed back into the car.

"I'll come up for you," he suggested, but she shook her head.

Of all her friends, Alec Henson alone had been admitted to the flat on the second floor. As a brother-officer of Curtis Anker and the man to whom she had been recommended for war-work, he was presumed to know that she was keeping the rooms in Duke Street aired and occupied until the end of the war; he was further presumed to imagine that, when Curtis came home on leave, he took a room at his club. From eyes so unsuspecting there was nothing to conceal in the rooms themselves or in an old-established and seemingly passionless friendship; and, if she barred her door indiscriminately against all others, it was less from fear of detection than from dread of sacrilege. The hall and staircase were common to the house; but, when she shut herself into their own flat, Joan felt always that she was being rapt into the life of Curtis and almost received into his arms. Whenever Alec came in for a drink after the theatre, she fancied that Curtis was somewhere in the room; and her attention wandered from their conversation. When her friends telephoned or wrote to her, she could never escape the grudging sense that they were trying to force their way into the enchanted world where she had spent her interrupted honeymoon.

"But they're not likely to understand *that*," she sighed, as she carried the day's letters into her sitting-room and dropped them on the pile that remained, still unopened, from the morning.

When she came home from the office, she wanted to think of Curtis; and, by thinking aloud, she could fancy that he was listening.

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"If you're right, darling . . . oh, and I *pray* you are! . . ."

If an armistice were sought before the middle of the month, she would have him back, smiling and safe, within a fortnight; he was overdue for leave, and, when next he came, there would be no more agony of parting. One day, as she sat like this, warming her tired body and lulling her anguished brain, the door behind her would open softly, a single gust of colder air would set the smoke of her cigarette wavering, she would turn her head . . . and see Curtis framed in the doorway! Travel-stained, ill-shaven and gaunt, threatening the lintel with his close-cropped, fleshless head, he would stand for a moment smiling whimsically down at her; and then, because her heart always stopped, because she would never break herself of crying if he came back in the same way a thousand times, she would find herself gathered into his arms with her face pressed against his faded ribbons and tobacco-scented tunic. . . . And an artificially nonchalant voice would say: "I'm back in good time . . ." and a voice of transcendent tenderness would whisper: "I'm going to take you out to dinner. . . . Did I startle you, sweetheart? . . . Play up, play up!"

Joan closed her eyes and gripped the arms of her chair till the picture dissolved. For a moment she could have sworn that a breath of cold air struck on her neck and shoulders, that a handle clicked as the door was pushed gently to; when she opened her eyes to the November night, she could have sworn that the yellow shafts from the lamp were conspiring with the smoke-grey wreaths of fog to make a dim figure in weather-worn khaki, to pose it for an instant among the shadows by Curtis' chair, to melt it finally into

transparency as she stared through the shadow and fog to the glazed bookcases behind. Though the room was warm, though the door was shut, Joan sprang to her feet with a shiver.

"I know *some* one who stands a good chance of being late for dinner," she murmured, as she ripped the envelopes from her letters. "Still, one may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," she added, as her eyes travelled down the first page of the neglected *Times*.

Anker, Lieut.-Col. . . .

It seemed strange, after that moment of mysterious chill, that the room should suddenly have become so hot; a burning wind beat on her face till she could no longer breathe; and, as she ceased to breathe, her heart ceased to beat. If only she could keep it from ever beating again, she would die . . . and escape; but, though the veins in her head were charged to bursting, death came no nearer, she could not make away with consciousness, her eyes remained fixed on the same three lines of remorseless exulting print:

Anker, Lieut.-Col. Curtis, D.S.O., Lowland Light Infantry, dearly-loved elder son of the late Gen. Sir Charles and of Lady Anker, Marston Park, Surrey, and beloved husband . . .

As she fell, the drab shadows gathered again about the chair on the other side of the fireplace; and, as she lay fighting for the breath which hitherto she had been resisting, a reedy voice, faint with long travel and longer waiting, whispered:

"Play up. . . . Play up. . . . Play up." . . .

CHAPTER TWO

AN EXERCISE IN PLAYING UP

"Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break."

—SHAKESPEARE: *Macbeth*. Act 4, Sc. 3.

AS soon as she could move, Joan felt for the bruised side of her head where it had struck the table. To her surprise the skin was unbroken; to her greater surprise, she had not strained nor twisted herself in her fall through space, and, though she seemed to have lain unconscious for half eternity, the clock shewed her that less than four minutes had passed since she picked up *The Times* on her way to dress.

In a quarter of an hour Alec Henson would call for her with his car. . . . If she telephoned herself, there would be enquiries and forced explanations; there would be sympathy and offers of help, if she said that she was indisposed or had received bad news; but, by locking herself in her room and leaving her landlord to send a colourless message, she could win at least a few hours in which to establish some foothold in this new reeling world.

As she rang the bell and waited, Joan turned to a tarnished mirror and rehearsed her lines in a whisper, watching the reflection of her lips:

"I don't know whether you've seen the papers, Milsom. There's bad news. I'm sorry to say Colonel Anker . . ."

Uncontrollably, her voice died tremulously away at the name.

"I'm sorry to say Colonel Anker . . ." she tried again. "Colonel Anker . . ." She moistened her lips and took the sentence with a running start: "I'm sorry to say Colonel Anker has been killed." . . . Her tone was composed enough, provided Milsom did not attempt to sympathize; and of that she would give him no chance. There were plans to make, plans to make . . . *there* were such wonderful *plans* to make . . . *here* we go *gathering knots* of *may*. . .

Joan walked to the table and stood stiffly at attention before hysteria swept her reason away.

"Did you ring, madam?"

She nodded to the deferential black-coated figure in the doorway and felt, as she drew a deep breath, that all was going to be incredibly easy. If he had called her "miss," if he had departed by a hair's-breadth from his elaborate and confused fiction that Curtis and she were married and that, for reasons of her own, she retained her maiden name . . .

"I-don't-know-whether-you've-seen-the-papers," she began with a rush. "There's-bad-news . . ."

"Not the colonel?" interrupted Milsom in a voice of desolation that sapped all her composure.

"K-K-Kil . . ." Joan gasped.

Then she pointed a trembling finger at *The Times* and turned away.

The paper rustled as he picked it up from the floor; she heard his tongue clacking; and, when she was nerved to face him, there were tears behind his unfamiliar steel spectacles:

"Three years. . . . Three years, come Christmas. And before he was married, right away back . . ."

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"We must . . . pull . . . ourselves together, Milsom," said Joan, holding out her hand to him.

"Oh, my dear! . . . I'm sure I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"There's . . . ever so much to do. Two telephone messages. . . . I'm afraid I shan't be able to keep these rooms on. . . . I suppose you know the colonel and I weren't married; we were to have been . . . after the war . . . when he'd got his divorce. . . . I'll give you Mrs. Anker's address and ask you to send all his things to her. I . . . I shall try to get a bedroom at my club." . . .

"But you'll stay here for the present, ma'am? . . . I'm . . . not thinking of the rent."

"Oh, I know you're not! . . . But I can't stay on here without him. . . . I . . . expect you know that all his friends think he lent me these rooms; *I* didn't want to make any secret, but he preferred people to think we were . . . just friends. I had a letter this morning. It was his last wish. You'll promise to respect that, Milsom?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"I'm 'miss' now, Milsom. One of . . . Colonel Anker's . . . friends," she continued, half to herself. "I mustn't let any one see that I take this more to heart than if any other of my friends . . . had been killed. I must go on as though nothing had happened. . . . You'll see about his things, Milsom? It will hurt so terribly if I have to. And then you'd better see if you can find another tenant."

The man bowed and backed slowly to the door:

"Anything I can do, miss. . . . You said something about the telephone. . . . And you'd like something to eat, I expect."

Joan stared distractedly about the room until her attention became focussed on the clock.

"No, I must . . . go on," she repeated with sudden realization. "I'm dining out. Captain Henson's coming to fetch me in five minutes. . . . You might telephone to Mrs. Ferguson—somewhere in Hans Place—and say that we shall be a little late. Don't say anything about . . . the colonel. I'll tell . . . Captain . . . What did I say his name was? . . . I must practise getting used to . . . talking about him. And . . . thank you, Milsom, for everything."

As the door closed, she stood for a moment longer with her eyes shut and her hands pressed to her temples:

"Old *man*, I'm playing up as best I can. . . . I am, I *am*! . . . Come and talk to me while I dress! I'd *like* to wear my new black frock, but I suppose you'd think that was mourning. All right! I won't let you down! I'll stay to the end if my head *bursts*! They'll want me to dance. *Dance*! . . . I shall be *absolutely* all right in a minute, sweetheart; don't hurry me! What was I . . . ? Well, then, the only thing is my shabby old blue: it's the only other dress I can dance in. . . . It was bad luck you couldn't get your leave when it was due; but you'll come just the same, won't you? I hope it won't be a late party, because I want to get you to myself and hear about everything. And we're working *frightfully* long hours at the office now. It's all right! If I'm careful, I shall weather it; and I *won't* allow you to become a fusser about me. Just let me know you're there, and you can trust me to play up. They won't guess. You're just . . . one of my friends. . . . I *did* tell Milsom to say we should be late, didn't I?"

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When she returned to her sitting-room ten minutes later, Joan found Captain Henson lying on the sofa with his injured leg stretched in front of him.

"You said I wasn't to come up, but I thought it would be warmer here," he explained.

"Forgive me for keeping you waiting," Joan begged. "Do I look all right? I dressed in an awful hurry."

"You look . . . ravishing," answered Henson. Her eyes were shining and her lips eager as though she were in love with all the world. As he held out her cloak and she smiled her thanks over one bare shoulder, he could hardly restrain himself from taking her in his arms. At other times her short dark hair and big hazel eyes made her look so much like a grave, trusting child that he was half afraid even to tease her; but to-night some elusive breath of scent or the very fragrance of her flowerlike person in the misty room made her presence and touch provocative. "I've never dared ask how old you are, but you look about fifteen to-night."

"I'm glad, because . . . I've just had . . . rather a shock. Curtis has been killed. It's in the paper. He was one of my best friends, and I had a letter from him only this morning. And now . . . I'd rather not talk about it. . . . Can you manage these stairs or would you like an arm?"

For a moment Henson stood rigid in the doorway; then he followed her lead:

"I can manage all right, thanks. . . . We look as if we were in for a wet night. You must let me bring you home afterwards."

They sat without speaking until the car stopped in Hans Place. As she took off her cloak and looked anxiously at her reflection for the pallor of fatigue

or suffering, Joan could not remember for a moment with whom she was dining, and, though the silver monogram on the back of a hair-brush suggested a name, she had no idea when or why she had first been invited to this prim, Victorian house. Through the open door of the dining-room could be seen a table laid for eighteen or twenty; and she prayed that the other names and faces would not elude her as unexpectedly as Mrs. Ferguson's; in the drawing-room, "Valenciennes" and "old Curtis" struck on her hearing, and she prayed that no one would notice the stiff lines of her face.

"Yes, I heard to-day. . . . I had to arrange about sending all his things to Mrs. Anker," Joan found herself explaining to Mrs. Ferguson. "You know he let me have his flat? I hadn't a moment till to-night."

"It's terribly sad," was the answer. "I hardly knew him at all; but, coming at the end like this, when the war *must* be nearly over. . . . *Poor Beatrice!*"

Before she could speak, Joan had to be sure that her voice was not going to break. Who was Beatrice that she should be pitied? Had none of these grinning chatterers a word for *her*?

"It's . . . a great loss. He was a dear friend to me," she answered. "Has any one heard any details?"

"Reggie Bagshot was wounded at the same time," said Mrs. Ferguson, nodding towards a cheerful, pug-faced boy with his left arm in a sling.

When they had distributed themselves round the dining-room table, Joan found her place between Bagshot and a softly handsome man whose card bore the name of Major Cornwallis. Both had been in the same battalion as Curtis and were more than ready

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to discuss him when they found her labelled as a friend. After her triumphant entry, however, Joan needed time to overcome the reaction. The room was smaller than usual and glaringly lighted; though her arms were mottled with cold, the air was too hot to breathe; and the people about her, at one moment almost invisibly remote, kept surging across the table and on either side of her till the floor rose unsteadily and toppled back with a crash that nearly drowned the roar of voices.

Joan gulped down half a tumbler of cold water and sat with her eyes closed. As soon as the danger of fainting was past, she looked cautiously round and tested her memory of names and faces. For a girl who had come to London without knowing any one but her own uncongenial relations, she had collected a veritable army of acquaintances in the last eighteen months: of the twenty-two people packed into this glowing furnace, she knew all but the man opposite her, and he was quickly explained by Cornwallis as a man whom she was likely to meet everywhere, "Frankie Wharton," a banker by day and an epicure by night, a good fellow but a bore, over-age and unfit but a staunch worker, a man finally who would pick up a title before he was much older.

"It's an ill war that blows nobody good."

Joan nodded mechanically and lapsed into reverie. Now that it was all over, she realized that the bravest act of her unheroic life was to walk without a tremor into this assembly of the dead: if Curtis had indeed been picked up, as the pug-faced boy asserted, with a blue smudge of powder over his right temple, it was inconceivable that God should leave this black-and-red barber's block of a Cornwallis unscathed or let

young Bagshot off with a flesh-wound; inconceivable that Frank Wharton should be spared to sip his sherry and enjoy life, even to remain alive, when her gaunt, tall Curtis had been shovelled underground. One thing or the other: if Curtis was dead, they were ten times more dead, they had never been alive, it was folly for her to talk to them. If Curtis were *not* dead. . . .

Joan sat very still, staring at her *menu* and afraid to begin her soup lest the spoon should rattle out of her hand. This was a return of the ghastly moment when she became almost hysterical:

There were such wonderful plans to make.

Plans to make, plans to make . . .

Was some one playing upstairs? Or was it in the street?

If she and Curtis alone were alive among this company of the dead . . . As they were . . . Why, otherwise, had she troubled to adorn herself? Lieutenant-Colonel Curtis Anker, six-foot-three in his stockings, supple as rubber and hard as steel, with a skin seamed and tattooed by twenty years of bullet- and bayonet-wounds, was hardly the man to go down before the lucky hit of a sneaking sharp-shooter. The living force that caught her up, like a kitten, in lean, irresistible arms and crushed her against heaving chest and throbbing heart was not a thing to be puffed out by the "ping" of a ridiculous mosquito. . . . It was time to push back her chair and tell these dead people that they were mad; or, if that sounded rude, at least that they were misinformed. . . .

"*Labouring under a misapprehension*" was a phrase that would tickle Alec Henson, with his loathing for pretentious official English!

"Play up! Play up!"

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Joan dared not turn her head towards the voice at her elbow, but she laid aside her *menu* and attacked her soup with a steady hand; her voice, too, was steady, when she murmured a sentence of sympathy to the pug-faced boy with the wounded arm.

"Oh, it's nothing to signify," he assured her. "One has to collect a thing of this kind from time to time, or one would never get back to England. Besides, the party would have been a pretty fair frost for Mrs. Ferguson if Jack and I had *both* failed her."

Glancing sideways from her cheerful neighbour to the anxious faces of those who still had lives in jeopardy, Joan sought a phrase of incisive discouragement for such untimely Gasconade. As her glance took in a trembling hand and a restless eye with dilated pupil, she softened towards a boy who, at worst, was but a few hours returned from the fighting that had killed Curtis and, at best, might have been by his side when he fell.

"If you think you can take a lobster out of its claw with one hand, you're making the mistake of your life," she told him. "Let me, *please!* . . . Did you know Curtis well? He was a great friend of mine."

"He was my C.O., poor old man," Bagshot answered, with an indifference that, to Joan, was worse than a studied insult. "I've known him all my life."

"Were you anywhere near him when he was . . . killed?"

The word could not be spoken easily; and Joan felt that, by using it, she was helping to kill Curtis. But *he* would understand that they had to keep up a pretence before these poor dead people.

"No, I only heard about it at the clearing-station. Bertie Millbank was with him, I believe, but I was

making tracks for home by the time they brought him in. . . . Beatrice came to see me this afternoon, but I couldn't tell her more than I'm telling you. . . . There's to be a memorial service at Marston on Thursday."

"So I saw in the paper," Joan answered quietly.

"Are you going? We might do it together," Bagshot proposed eagerly.

He would have used the same tone if he had been asking her to accompany him to a revue. Joan tried to speak, but was forced to take refuge in a fit of coughing until, above the clatter of knives and the discord of conversation, a reassuring voice whispered:

"Play up, play up!"

"I shan't be able to get away," she answered easily. "I'm working in one of the War Office extensions, and we hardly know if we're standing on our head or our heels at present. . . . Besides, I hate memorial services," she continued, half to herself: "they don't mean to be material, but I always think people are so busy tidying the body out of sight and preparing for the resurrection that they lose sight of the soul. It doesn't occur to them that, when you've got rid of your body, you're more free than ever before: you can come and go through space . . . to any one you think you can help." . . .

"Like the jolly old angels at Mons," suggested Bagshot sceptically. "I never saw 'em myself, but some one sent me a book about them."

"They only come when you want them," Joan answered tranquilly.

No longer bruised or angry, she would have given anything to turn and catch Curtis' eye, directing his

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attention to the young rationalist who did not believe in him.

"That's all right for *you*, but it's rough luck on them if they're counting on a quiet time," Bagshot pointed out with ponderous humour. "Imagine the position of a departed turf-commission agent. *'I want a pony each way on Cymbeline. . . . What will you give me on Wristwatch for the Two Thousand Guineas and the Derby?'* He'd never have a moment to himself."

To grow impatient, Joan knew, was to reveal emotion; to reveal emotion was not to "play up," as she had learned from Curtis to understand that phrase.

"Did you ever see the Wagram scene in *L'Aiglon*?" she asked. "When you hear the ghostly voices of all the men who had died for Napoleon, rising in one great moan of protest against the poor little King of Rome?"

She repeated half a dozen lines and stopped in confusion when she found that every one was listening to her. Alec Henson, seated at right-angles, leaned forward to create a diversion.

"Do you remember the ghostly voices in Masfield's *Philip*?" he asked.

*"We are the Indian Souls,
Loosed from the gold-mines where our brothers bleed.
We swell the tale of blood; we dug you gold;
We bore your burdens till we died of thirst;
We sweated in the mines or shook with cold,
Washing the gravel which the blast had burst.
We dived for pearls until our eyeballs bled;
You burned us till we told where treasure lay;
We were your Indian slaves, but we are dead;
Our red account is cast and you must pay."*

"Has that ever been staged?" Frank Wharton asked. "I don't know. . . . The thing of his that I should

like to see most of all would be *Good Friday*." . . .

Joan watched the discussion, set on foot by her own six lines of French, spreading till it embraced the whole table. Mrs. Ferguson nodded gratefully; and, though Joan could imagine no reason for gratitude, she smiled back before detaching herself from the conversation.

Now that the danger of fainting was past, she could see her neighbours in their natural dimensions and account for her own presence there. Mrs. Ferguson invited her partly because she was living alone, partly because she was an acquisition to any house, with her dancing and singing, most of all with that effervescence of spirit that was sometimes so hard to maintain. The dinners in Hans Place were difficult to galvanize, because the Fergusons thought high spirits questionable at all times and indefensible in war; they relaxed under protest and tried with all their hospitable hearts to amuse the young officers whom their nephew, Jack Keithley, brought under their protection; but, when a dance was given, the girls were selected as carefully as if they were to be ladies-in-waiting to a princess royal. Sponsored by Curtis and Alec Henson, Joan had apparently been taken on trust, as one too young to be debauched by the "modern spirit"; she wondered what would have been said if any one had explored the careless formula which Curtis always used: "*Will you let me see Miss Prendergast home? I can always find taxis, even in the middle of an air-raid.*" . . .

"Has *The Dynasts* ever been staged?" Frank Wharton's voice broke in on her reverie; and she found him looking at her interrogatively. "That would be a pretty tall order, I should think."

"I suppose so."

Joan discovered that she could not talk of books

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and plays to people who might disagree with her: in poetry she and Curtis had the same loves, and she found greater satisfaction in repeating under her breath:

*"Some say the spot is banned: that the pillar Cross-and-Hand
Attests to a deed of hell;
But of else than of bale is the mystic tale
That ancient Vale-folk tell . . ."*

Until she learned it from his lips, she had read but little of Hardy's poetry; when she realized her indebtedness, she had tried to clear it by introducing Curtis to Francis Thomson, Alice Meynell and Walter de la Mare.

*"As an Arab journeyeth
Through a sand of Ayaman . . ."*

She recalled the evening five months before when she had read the lines to him in Wargrave backwater. In twenty years of soldiering, Curtis had found few brother-officers to sympathize with his love of books; in Beatrice he had found a wife who abandoned, on her wedding-day, every pretence of sharing his interests and devoted herself, for six years, to satisfying a barren social ambition.

*"There came a Thief one night to Robin's Castle,
He climbed up into a tree;
And sitting with his head among the branches,
A wondrous Sight did see . . ."*

They had read the whole of *Peacock Pie*, in alternate songs, when he was last home on leave. For his next leave she had been keeping Waley's *Chinese Poems*; they might read one or two together before she went to bed. . . . She could repeat several of them

from memory, but Curtis would think she was neglecting her neighbours and was not playing up. . . .

"I *have* played up, I shall go on playing up." . . .

As Mrs. Ferguson moved to the door, Reggie Bagshot, hurrying ahead to open it, turned to murmur:

"It would be rather jolly if you said I might have the first dance with you."

"But you ought to be back in hospital," Joan answered; "certainly not dancing with that arm."

"I've no intention of dancing with this arm. It would probably drop off if I did."

On her other side Alec Henson murmured:

"Can you possibly spare me one to sit out?"

"I'll do whatever any one asks!" Joan cried, with the smile that, Curtis told her at their first meeting, mounted to a man's head quicker than wine. . . .

"My dear, you always make my parties a success," said Mrs. Ferguson. Joan at last understood that earlier expression of gratitude. "I was afraid this was going to fall rather flat. First of all, my nephew Jack having his leave cancelled; then the news about poor Colonel Anker. He had so many friends that it cast quite a gloom." . . .

"It's a marvellous party!" Joan cried in rapture. "I hope you told the men they mustn't stay downstairs too long?"

If Curtis could realize what the effort cost her, he would respect her for a spirit as indomitable as his own. "A decent show" was all that mattered; and, to judge by the radiant looks that followed her round the room, she was doing even more than was required of her. Major Cornwallis insisted that she must lunch with him next day; Reggie Bagshot, until gently checked, made ardent love to her; and, whenever she

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could spare half a dance to sit out with Alec Henson, she found him in a progressively worse temper which she attributed first to fatigue and later to jealousy. It was only as he drove her home that she found him to be unaffectedly shocked by her callousness in dancing when the news of Curtis Anker's death was less than a day old.

"I couldn't get the poor devil out of my mind," he muttered, with his head averted and his fingers drumming on the window. "We'd been together ever since South Africa." . . .

Joan could not listen to the end of the sentence. No one had ever before charged her with heartlessness; she would rather have died than be thought indifferent to Curtis . . . by his own friends; when a sacrifice was interpreted as a betrayal, it was time to die.

"I don't think . . . *he'd* have wanted it to make any difference," she answered.

The long-sustained drumming of impatient knuckles, growing contagious, set her own fingers tapping a rag-time. Once alone and in the dark, she knew that all would be well; and, when at last the car stopped in Duke Street, she could hardly wait to bid her escort good-night. Hurrying through the dimly-lighted hall and up the stairs, she let herself in with such anxious precipitancy that she nearly fell full length. The door once pushed-to behind her, all agitation passed; without feeling, as usual, for the switches, she walked slowly through the dark vestibule, as Curtis and she always walked after a tiring party; undressing in the dark, she sponged her aching body with hot water and bathed her forehead with scent; then, pulling back the bed-clothes, she lay down with her hands clasped be-

hind her head and her eyes closed, listening and waiting.

Later, she turned wonderingly towards the frosted whiteness of the fan-light; later still, she felt her way into the corridor and caught back the spring-lock of the front door. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

"THE KING'S GOVERNMENT . . ."

NELSON: "I have not long to live . . .

. . . Those tiller ropes
They've torn away, get instantly repaired! . . .
Cover my face. There will no good be done
By drawing [men's] attention off to me."

—THOMAS HARDY: *The Dynasts*.

WHEN Alec Henson called at Duke Street the following day, he informed Joan in confidence that he had been warned for duty whenever and wherever the terms of peace were to be discussed.

"I shall want you to come with me," he added; "so, if you'd care for a few days' leave . . ."

Joan shook her head and went back to the great discovery that had come to her in the night. Time and again, the evening before, she had feared that she was going to die; now she feared that she was not going to die. She was sure of it . . . and a new life had to be constructed. Lying in bed, she had heard Milsom letting up the blinds with a rattle and shifting the furniture as he swept out the sitting-room; his work had taken no account of the war even when his own son was killed; rooms must be swept and meals prepared though the earth lay loose over Colonel Anker's grave. And, by the same token, this day was filled with the engagements which Joan had made in that other life of hers; how small soever her part,

she must play it. "The King's Government must be carried on." . . .

"So long as you can give me time to buy a few things . . . and perhaps go down to my people for a week-end . . ."

At the risk of pitying herself, Joan brooded for a while over those of her friends who had lost husbands or fathers; they always had some one to share their grief, but she could not allow her own mother even to suspect that she had any cause for sorrow. The chief messenger, standing to attention by the door of the department, expected his customary smile from her; and in the cloak-room, when Miss Pearson edged towards her with an air of mystery that was belied by her shining eyes, she was required to whisper: "Any news this morning?"

Now that Curtis was dead, her love ran to waste; and she would go mad if no one would accept her humble tenderness.

"The King's Government must be carried on." . . .

Joan hastened along the dusty cocoanut-matting of the central passage until she reached a door with two framed visiting-cards proclaiming *Captain Alexander Henson* and *Miss Prendergast*. Her trays were already overflowing with many-coloured files, tagged together like the bellows of a concertina; she had hardly begun to look at the first when the telephone rang and a distracted registry-clerk, as ever in search of missing papers, enquired the whereabouts of an elusive memorandum.

"It was minuted to Major Heath yesterday afternoon," she answered with automatic briskness.

The bell rang again:

"Home Office speaking. Is that Miss Prendergast?"

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Will you tell Captain Henson that Sir Foster can see him at three o'clock?"

A messenger came in to announce that a conference with the Ministry of National Service was ready to begin. Without relinquishing the telephone, Joan pushed over the papers for the meeting and entered the Home Office appointment in Henson's diary. The familiar bustle of work and the ever-new thrill of importance in saying "Will you put me through to the Foreign Office, please?"—almost as though she and Mr. Balfour were directing the war together—drugged her into a transitory feeling that she was, after all, a part of "the King's Government" and that she was sticking as obstinately to her duty as Curtis had done at the front. These concertina files mounted so quickly, whenever a messenger came into the room, that she decided to forego her usual cup of tea at eleven o'clock; the decision was only reconsidered when she caught herself pleading work as an excuse for avoiding the watchful eyes and chattering tongues of the other girls.

"I must . . . play up," she whispered; and the words sounded like the echo of a voice by her side. "I shall be quite all right to-morrow, thank you, Mrs. Ranger. I didn't sleep very well last night, so I'm just a little bit tired to-day."

"You mustn't let Captain Henson work you too hard, dear," said the female-establishment-officer maternally, frowning at the shadows under Joan's eyes. "Three of my girls were absolutely knocked up before you came; he's a regular slave-driver."

"He won't let me do half as much as I want," Joan assured her.

"By to-morrow . . . it may all be over. I made

Miss Fountain promise to 'phone me the very moment they hear anything at the War House," confided Miss Pearson.

"And then . . . life will be really worth living . . . for you," Joan answered with a glowing smile. "I do hope you'll be very happy. . . . Now I must be getting back: Captain Henson's at a conference, so I'm single-handed."

With a murmur of thanks she escaped to her own room, leaving the others to debate for the hundredth time whether anything was likely to come of the friendship between Miss Prendergast and Captain Henson. He was rather old for her, slightly choleric and hardly a romantic figure; but they were prepared to forgive him much if Joan entrusted her happiness to his keeping. . . .

Reggie Bagshot telephoned at twelve to know if she would dine with him; and Joan, with panic realization that she had made no plans to avoid a solitary evening, accepted so enthusiastically that a man even less self-satisfied than her young host might have felt flattered.

The luncheon with Major Cornwallis was only of importance in occupying her mind for an hour and a half and in leading to another discovery; when he, too, murmured sympathetically that she was looking tired, she replied again that she had slept badly but would be all right on the morrow. It seemed possible to go through life with no more than three threadbare phrases! "*The King's Government must be carried on*" . . . "*Play up*" . . . "*All right in the morning.*" . . .

"If I go to bed early, I simply can't sleep" was added

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to her repertory as an excuse for even half an hour more of the Bagshot boy's company.

As the day wore on, Curtis had become more remote. He had, indeed, hunted her from his dressing-room when she stood fascinated by a case of razors, but it was harder to feel conscious of his presence by daylight. When he came to her the night before, flesh and spirit had been sundered but a few hours; spirit might well be wandering uncertainly before floating to its appointed place; but, as the fleshly frame lost more and more of the marks whereby men had known it for Curtis Anker, the spirit might come even more rarely until the day when she called and heard no answer.

"Curtis. . . . Curtis. . . . Curtis. . . ."

The desolation of the silent, chill rooms drove her back to the stairhead in the hope of finding that Bagshot was still within hail. Already he was fancying that she had fallen in love with him, but that could not be helped; it was better to tramp the streets all night than to see her letters lying on the hall table—as though any letter could interest her now! *The Times* folded in its rack—as though she could ever want to read a paper again!—the whole stage set as on the evening before when she ran in with ecstasy in her heart and news of Curtis in her pocket.

"It would have been better if he'd never written," she told herself, as she looked down through grey clouds of mist into the empty hall. "Perhaps it would have been better if we'd never met." . . .

A cry of terror broke from her as she heard the street door opening; it changed to a sob of relief as she saw Milsom mounting the stairs. Hurrying on tiptoe into the flat, she was seated in an armchair,

reading her letters, by the time he came in to announce that "the colonel's things" had been despatched to Surrey.

"The place looks a bit empty, miss, I'm afraid," he added.

Joan laid aside her letters and walked with him to her own room:

"Oh, but, Milsom, you haven't packed *everything* yet! The little bookstand is mine, but the things on that table belong to him. And the photograph-frame by the bed. . . . You might take the photograph out: I gave him that, so I think I've a moral right to it. I'll give it to you, Milsom, if you'd care to have it. I'm afraid I've no right to anything of his. If you'd make just one more parcel . . ."

While the last memorials of their life together were tidied on to a towel in the middle of the floor, Joan returned to the dismantled dining-room to spare herself this last incineration of all that had made existence precious. Stripped of the shades, which they had bought together, the light shone penetrating and white into every corner of the room, leaving no shelter for even such wisps of grey fog as might in imagination and the glow of orange silk be assembled into the likeness of a man. The pipes and cigar-boxes had been taken from the mantelpiece, the books from their shelves.

"Not much of a welcome, old man," Joan whispered as her eyes strayed to the door which, by force of new habit, she had set open. "We haven't left much mark here, have we? No one would think, from this . . . And was I much good to you? It was all so short! We went through such agony of fear for so

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very little happiness! Would it have been better if we'd never met?"

Outside in the passage she heard her bedroom door closing; as Milsom's footsteps grew fainter, she rushed in and threw herself on her knees while the tears poured in hot rivulets down her cheeks for the first time since Curtis went back after his last leave.

"No, no, no, *no!*" she cried in the darkness. "Thank God for you, thank God for every moment of you! I was a child, blind. . . . I've seen Heaven . . . if it was only for a moment! Thank God for your love!"

At a tap on the door she scrambled from her knees.

"Would you like anything to eat, miss?" enquired Milsom. "I thought you were looking a bit tired." . . .

"Oh, thanks. . . . I didn't sleep very well last night. I shall be all right to-morrow," Joan answered for the last time.

It was the last time, because she fainted next day as she was dressing and had to send an excuse to the office. The morning after, she was in her place before nine o'clock, trying to make up arrears of work; but Alec Henson sent her home at midday. That night she fainted again; and, once in bed, though she lay sleepless for twenty-two hours of the time, she was too weak to get up until twenty-four hours later. Fear of shaming Curtis then forced her to her feet; joy in pleasing him made her put on her last new dress. But for dizziness and qualms of deadly nausea, she would have eaten some food.

At the end of dinner, as she crouched over the fire with an unlighted cigarette, she was wondering whether to go back to bed when Milsom entered with a visiting-card and the statement that Captain Millbank

would be greatly obliged if she would see him for a moment.

"He hopes you'll excuse him for calling so late, miss, but he has only just come to London."

"But . . . do I know him?"

"I can't say, miss. He *asked* for you, but I can't call him to mind."

Joan was spurring her drowsy brain to remember where she had heard the name before, when an officer in great-coat and uniform entered with his cap in one hand and a letter in the other. As he surrendered his coat to Milsom, she recognized with a stab of misgiving, Curtis Anker's regimental badges; misgiving faded into neutral expectancy as she placed the name of Millbank among those which she had heard from Reggie Bagshot or Mrs. Ferguson or Curtis himself.

"This is an unpardonable time for calling," her visitor began. "And I'm not fit to be seen, still less to shake hands with you. I came straight here from the station. . . . I *am* speaking to Miss Prendergast? I believe you are a friend of *my* poor friend Anker. I was with him, when he was killed; and, in going through his things, I found this letter addressed to you. I was due for leave, so I thought I'd bring it in case there was anything I could do." Handing her the letter, he turned to the fire so that she might read it unobserved. "It's cold to-night."

For many minutes Joan stared at the strong, clear writing and contended with a wild belief that the hand which had traced her name so firmly must still be warm, that she had misheard Millbank, that a miracle had happened and he was come to say that Curtis was alive, that Curtis himself . . . with the same build and something of the same voice . . . had kissed her to

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sleep and was playing a horrible practical joke on her . . . in a nightmare.

The test for a nightmare was that the victim tried to speak and could not. . . .

"It's . . . wonderfully kind of you." As her own voice struck on her ears, Joan knew that she was awake. Her visitor shrank from a gaunt six-foot-three to something under six feet; his voice—as he uttered a deprecating murmur—was two tones higher than Curtis'. "You've . . . just come back? . . . Then . . . you've had no dinner!"

"I can get that at the club any time."

"No, no! Ring the bell, *please!* It's somewhere, I've forgotten. . . . Oh, you *must* forgive me!"

"You poor child!"

Joan found herself caught in Millbank's arms and led backwards till she could lean against the table.

"The wr-writing," she gasped.

"I know. . . . I was in two minds whether to bring it; and, if I were you, I'd be in no hurry to read it. I'd be in no hurry about anything. Take things gently! It's no use trying to bear up beyond a certain point. If you let yourself go now, you'll be better, stronger afterwards. . . . I won't let you fall! I'm going to carry you to that chair. You're not *always* as thin as this, I hope; why, there's nothing of you!"

"Oh, I wish I was dead!" Joan broke out against his facile concern.

"Don't say that, my child," Millbank entreated her. "That's not the kind of thing Anker would have cared to hear. . . . Tell me what your other name is; I feel so far away if I have to call you 'Miss Prendergast.' "

"Joanna. Every one always calls me 'Joan.' "

Millbank took one of her hands and raised it to his lips:

"I've . . . a sister of that name. Not a bit like you, though. Very fair, and the naughtiest little demon . . ."

"Won't you . . . won't you ring the bell?" Joan begged him. "You must be starving."

"Honestly, I'm all right, but if I really may stop here for a bit . . ." Millbank glanced at the girl's cowering body and trembling lips. "I'll find your man and see what he can do for me . . . including hot water and a nail-brush."

By the time that he returned to the sitting-room, the letter was out of sight and Joan was helping Mil-som to lay the table. The effort of delivering his carefully prepared opening speech and her subsequent collapse had kept Millbank from studying her until this moment; but, as she arranged the knives and forks, he saw a white and pinched oval face under a straight bar of short black hair; her lips were closed in a thin and almost colourless line; and her hazel eyes smouldered darkly in hollow, shaded sockets. As she bent down to reach a decanter of whisky from the side-board, her arms and shoulders seemed so thin that he wondered how her dress remained in place.

"You'll tell me . . . everything, won't you?" Joan begged, when they were alone; and, at the end of his brief recital, "Did he ever talk to you about me?"

"I never knew of your existence till I found that letter," Millbank answered.

"We were to have been married as soon as he got his divorce. That's what makes it so hard. . . . Whenever he was home, he lived here . . . too. . . .

I'm not ashamed! I'd have told the whole world if he'd let me. . . . Does that shock you?"

"Of course it doesn't!"

As he continued his dinner with eyes averted from her, Millbank heard a quivering sigh of relief.

"I'm glad. . . . I *want* to be friends with you; I believe you understand. . . . And you were friends with Curtis." . . . Suddenly remembering Alec Henson's cruel misunderstanding, she shrank from him and had to be coaxed back with a smile. "It's been so hard pretending these five days. I've gone out, night after night, because I was so afraid of giving Curtis away. I *must* tell some one! . . . What was so terrible . . . every one being sweet . . . and no one really wanting me. I'd got into the habit of giving all my love to Curtis, I used to feel it welling up inside me, I wrote to him day after day, *twice* a day. All of a sudden . . . *not wanted!* I . . . don't . . . matter . . . to . . . *any one!*"

As she stumbled forward with her face hidden in her hands, Millbank caught her under the arms before her head could strike the table.

"You matter enormously to me, Joan," he whispered. "Anything in the wide world that I can do . . . You oughtn't to be all alone like this, you know. Haven't you any people?"

"They're no good, because I can't tell them."

"Won't you tell me? . . . How old are you?"

"Twenty . . . very nearly."

She seemed to be ashamed of her youth; but Millbank, who had dried the tears of younger sisters and brothers for as long as she had been alive, knew how to overcome her self-consciousness.

"Any relation to a Prendergast I used to know at the Curragh?" he asked.

"I don't think so. We had no connection with the army until the war. Then my three brothers. . . . They went into the Devon Regiment. We lived near Ilfracombe after we left Yorkshire; father was in business there . . . smelting, . . . until he was ordered to live in the south. There were seven of us. I'm the youngest. They were training me to decorate houses." . . .

For the first time Millbank had leisure to look about him. Though the rooms were dismantled, the woman who had arranged them knew all that was to be known about colour.

"A fascinating job," he murmured. "I can give you a commission as soon as the war's over. . . . Where did you run across Anker?"

"He came down to Ilfracombe after he was wounded the first time. I don't know how it began . . . but we found we were in love. At first he wouldn't look at me, of course, because he had a wife already. And I wouldn't look at *him*, I tried to overcome it; we were always saying good-bye and coming back again. When it was more than we could stand, he went away, . . . and I followed. I didn't follow *him*, I was just dragged. I told father I'd been offered work in London. When we met . . . His wife had made him so miserable before, and he was desperate when he had to give me up. I was desperate, too, because I knew I should never meet love like that again. He struggled and struggled. . . . I struggled too, because it seemed such a tremendous thing to do, cutting myself off from my people and all the world, all I'd been taught to think was right. And then we gradually

began to see that we *must*. . . . He went away again . . . without a word . . . to find out if we really were in earnest. I'd have followed him if I could, but I didn't know where he'd gone; and this time *he* came back to *me*. I'd had time to think by then, . . . to think what it meant to be without him, . . . to imagine what would be left if I gave him up."

Leaving his dinner unfinished, Millbank placed one arm about the girl's cold, bare shoulders and, with the other hand, stroked her hair until she had regained composure.

"There were seven of us then," she resumed, "though my second brother was killed soon afterwards. Four girls . . ."

"Are any of you married?" Millbank asked, as she paused.

"Two. Dossie was the first; she married a man in the Irish Guards, . . . but she wasn't a bit in love with him, she almost said so; and I don't think they're very happy. . . . Then Margaret married Jack Grayson, the K.C. I expect you know him; he's nearly twenty years older than she is, and I'm afraid *she* only married him because she wanted money. I saw . . . in time . . . that, if I didn't take love when it came to me, I should have to do without it . . . like them. . . . I knew the risk: if any one found out, Curtis would be vilely attacked because I was only eighteen; and my people would never get over the . . . disgrace. . . . All that was . . . *nothing* to the risk of letting love go!" . . .

"And then . . . Curtis came back?" Millbank prompted her.

Springing to her feet, Joan turned to him with her

head thrown back and her arms flung upward in a flash of white:

"Thank God for him, thank God for the few months we *did* have together! I made him happy, I gave him all I had to give and prayed God that I might have more. I wanted to tell the whole world, I couldn't bear to behave as though I were *ashamed*." . . . Her arms fell, and she dropped on her knees by Millbank's chair with her hand on his arm and her head bent over her hands. "You're the only person I've ever told; and I oughtn't to have told any one. He wouldn't let me. . . . He said I *should* be injuring my people, though *I* knew he was only afraid I should injure myself. It was kept a secret; and I tried to pretend that, as we had one *more* secret which we shared with no one, this wasn't really a blot. . . . Everything was being prepared, the proceedings would have begun the moment the war was over. . . . And then . . . And then . . . And *now* . . ."

As her shoulders twitched, Millbank took her hands into his own and pressed them:

"Thank Heaven, you were happy even for a moment. You're still only a child, Joan, though you've . . . begun life at the wrong end, rather. You'll be happy again." . . .

With a convulsive movement she sprang up and affected interest in the cold and neglected dinner:

"I don't . . . matter any more. . . . His things have gone to the country; the memorial service was yesterday. It's . . . all over." Her voice sank to a whisper. "At first, while I still couldn't believe it, he used to come to me; . . . or so I fancied. He's given that up. When I lost faith and admitted that he was dead, I suppose I drove him away."

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"Your landlord told me you were leaving here. I hope you'll give me your address. Then, if you won't come to see me, I shall come to see you."

"That's very kind of you, . . . but there's nothing you can do."

"I could shew you that you still mattered."

CHAPTER FOUR

TO LET

When I had shed my glad year's leaf,
I did believe I stood alone,
Till that great company of Grief
Taught me to know this craving heart
For not my own.

—GEORGE MEREDITH: *The Lesson of Grief.*

WHEN she was called next morning, Joan arranged to have her luggage taken round to her club; and, as she left the house for the last time, she observed that Milsom had already hung a card in the hall window, announcing that there were gentlemen's chambers to let.

The words hardly symbolized her own feeling of finality and desolation. Her life with Curtis, her very illusions and hopes had come to an end when the last pitiful memorials of their union were packed out of sight; their rooms stood open to the first comer, eager to begin a new life of his own; and in a mysterious, wrong way she had been left behind. To let? As though *she* were capable of beginning again?

At the department she was greeted in chorus with the news that the Austrian army was suing for peace. Bulgaria and Turkey, she seemed to remember, had already capitulated; Germany's turn would come next. And then there would be peace at last over the whole earth; peace and preparations for a new life. The

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world was now "to let"; and she had mysteriously, wrongly survived into an existence that held no place for her.

"The conference," Alec Henson told her, "will be in Paris, almost certainly. Can you be ready to start at twenty-four hours' notice?"

"Yes. I'll go to Devonshire this week-end if we're not ordered away before."

"If you've anything to buy, you should see about it at once."

"I will. If you don't need me, I won't come back here till Tuesday."

As she put on her hat again, Joan wondered whether she was entitled to take three days for shopping that could be finished in a morning. Curtis always said that he liked to play people "half a trick above the strength of their hand," but he was human enough to realize that she was human; and, without undue self-pity, she could not forget that she was but twenty. Until the night before, it had not occurred to her that she had any age. . . .

"Twenty . . . very nearly," she repeated, remembering for the first time that she had received an unexpected visitor over-night, that she had talked to him about . . . everything. "And I shouldn't know him again if I saw him. I don't know his name, . . . though he kissed me when we said good-bye . . . and I kissed *him*, because he'd been so sweet."

She was surprised that she had kissed him, until she realized that it was the most natural thing in the world. As a baby, she had kissed every one who came to the house; when she abandoned pig-tails and short skirts, she kissed no man but her father. After Curtis had held her in his arms, she felt that any other man's lips

would defile her; but, at his death, she became insensible to other men. Her overnight visitor, talking generally of his younger sisters and in particular of her turbulent namesake, made her wish that she had as kindly and comfortable an elder brother.

Abandoning her expedition to the shops, Joan returned to Duke Street and searched until she found a visiting-card with the name *Captain Herbert Millbank, Naval and Military Club*. There was a pencilled address in St. James' Street and, overleaf, "Please come and see me. Bertie M."

"I'd like . . . to thank him," she told herself. "I hope he's by himself, because I shan't recognize him." Captain Millbank was not only by himself but wholly at Joan's service, if she would allow him to finish one letter.

"But I don't want anything! I came to thank you and . . . to say good-bye. I'm going into the country."

"Warm yourself for a bit first," he suggested, looking from the fire to the chill November mist that surged in penetrating waves against the narrow windows of the little furnished flat.

"I . . . really ought . . ."

She was wavering between door and fireplace when a somnolent cat stretched himself lazily and ambled forward to make friends with the newcomer. An involuntary shrinking and a little cry of dismay caused Millbank to take the animal into his arms.

"D'you dislike cats?" he asked. "I'll put him outside."

"No, please don't! I love them! It's only . . ."

As well as if she had finished her sentence, he could see that her nerve was broken.

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"He won't attack you. . . . Nobody's going to attack you, Joan," he assured her in answer to her unspoken terror. "There's no need to be frightened about anything in the world; and, if you *are* frightened, you know I'll look after you."

As he returned to the writing-table, Joan knelt down on the hearth-rug with her hands outstretched to the fire. As soon as she heard the regular scratch of his pen, she looked sideways up at him to fix his features on her memory against their next meeting. In the uncertain light he was an attractively ugly man of thirty-two or three, grey-eyed and sandy-haired, with an aquiline nose, outstanding pink ears and a jaw thrown temporarily out of drawing by the play of his muscles as he bit on the stem of his pipe; the hands were thin and strong, the body spare and in hard condition, though his studiously deliberate movements and steady voice, reminiscent of Curtis and of half a hundred others in the first hours of their leave, warned her that he, too, was "playing up" and striving to hide the marks of four years' strain.

Turning again to the fire, Joan took off her hat and left her heavy head to ache itself to death. Any head must drop off when it was so full of this blinding, hot lead. . . . The scratching of the pen continued unnoticed and, unnoticed, came to an end; too much numbed to realize that she was in turn being watched, she heard no sound as Millbank settled himself with a book in the chair beside her; and it was only when a burning coal clattered into the grate and he leaned forward to replace it that she remembered his presence.

"What's the time?" she asked sleepily, then winced at the shooting pain behind her eyes.

"I've no idea," he answered in the same tone, as, without looking at her, he returned to his book.

Kneeling upright was making her back ache, and, after this tiny disturbance of her reverie, she rested her head against the arm of his chair. The blanket of fog so deadened the noise of traffic that she could hardly believe she was in St. James' Street; and the fire was so warm that she could hardly keep awake. It must be very delightful, she reflected, to be a cat and to lie at the feet of a master who loved you. As though she had spoken her thoughts, Millbank's hand slipped over the arm of his chair and gently stroked her head. It must be marvellous to have a master who understood every feeling of your bewildered, dumb heart and let you come in out of the cold and . . . gather strength for whatever lay before you. If he had spoken, if he had expected her to speak, if he had remembered that she was a woman . . .

The hand was withdrawn to turn a page; when it came back, Joan kissed its fingers and laid her head once more against the arm of the chair. If he stroked her again, she might be able to sleep. "*Six for a woman, seven for a man, eight for a child and nine for a fool.*" . . . As a little girl, her nurse had waked her with those words in the dark winter mornings in Yorkshire, when it was so terribly hard to get up; in the last six days Joan had not slept for more than an hour a night; and, if she slept now, Captain Millbank must blame himself for putting her in front of such a fire. . . .

When she awoke, the room was even darker and more full of fog, but warmer than ever. By some magic means, she had been spirited on to a sofa and was lying under a military great-coat with her cheek

against a pillow. Captain Millbank was still reading in front of the fire; but, as she moved, he shut his book and came to her with a steaming tumbler of milk.

"What time d'you like to lunch?" he asked.

"Any time that suits you," she answered in drowsy delight at having some one to save her from all thought and action. Then, as her brain cleared, she sat up and looked at her watch: "It's one o'clock! Have I been here . . .? What *must* you think of me? I only looked in. . . . I was going to say good-bye, wasn't I? There's ever so much shopping to do before I go away, and I've wasted all your morning for you." . . .

"We might shop this afternoon, but we must have something to eat first," he suggested in a comfortable drawl. "D'you like to tidy up in my room? I'll prick your vanity by telling you that the cheek you've been lying on is bright pink and the other one's white."

As he helped her to rise, Joan tried to recapture the shreds of her independence:

"But I'm *not* going to inflict myself on you." . . .

"Meal for meal!" laughed Millbank. "I owe you for last night. Besides, I *told* you that you oughtn't to be alone; and I can't stand being alone myself. . . . I can take you to a place in Soho where there's no band and not many people. After that . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and drew a latch-key from his pocket. "I shan't bore you with invitations, but if ever you feel inclined to drop in . . . I shall be here if you'll ever relieve my loneliness at lunch or dinner. . . . Or if you want to talk . . . or read . . . or just sit and rest. . . . You'll find I have a lot of leeway to make up in the way of resting. But that's

all in the future; the lunch to-day, if you'll allow me, I must insist on; and, if you'll get ready, I'll telephone for a table."

After her one effort of self-assertion, Joan lapsed into her trance and allowed herself to be led to a chair in Millbank's bedroom, where he washed her hands for her and gravely brushed her hair.

"Dusting, I call this," Joan laughed . . . and was startled by the sound of her own laughter.

"D'you know a bullion-broker when you see one?" asked Millbank. "That's my job in peace-time; and the duties do *not* involve making untidy young females presentable."

Still more than half asleep and wholly without resistance, she was driven to a restaurant and plied with food; as they wandered from shop to shop, she roused herself to remember what she wanted to buy, then surrendered to the anæsthetic of walking with her arm through his and of dispensing with thought.

"I shall dine at home," he told her, as they reached her club; "about eight. There'll be enough for two, and I hope you'll come, but I don't want to make a nuisance of myself. Whether you come then or not, I shall be in all the evening. And now—*au revoir*."

Though she left him without an answer, Millbank was dressed by a quarter to eight on the chance that she would accept his invitation. Half an hour later, hope was still so much stronger than expectation that he postponed his dinner till nine o'clock; and, when at last he sat down alone, he had a second cover laid and set a savoury mixture of fish and cheese to keep warm in the fireplace.

When the dessert was brought in, he carried his wine to a table by the fire and sat tracing imaginary faces

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in the flames. If Joan had not entrusted herself implicitly to him, he would have been tempted to make love to her; if he saw much of her and if she continued to rely on him, he might make love to her against his will; though he had tried to dismiss it from his mind, he could not forget the moment overnight when she put up her lips to be kissed and he had embraced her with an arm which went all and more than all of the way round her thin shoulders.

"I must watch out," he murmured.

By the time that a man reached thirty-three, he began to regard marriage seriously. . . .

Though he heard no sound, Millbank became conscious that he was no longer alone. Withdrawing his gaze from the fire, he turned to find Joan once more kneeling by his side with her head against the arm of the chair; her eyes were dazed, like a sleep-walker's; and, almost involuntarily, his hand went out to stroke her hair.

"I'm not disturbing you?" she whispered.

"Yes and no. I was thinking about you at that moment, but I'd sooner have the reality than the image. Do you believe a glass of port would be good for you?"

"I'd like a pear. . . . But you mustn't feel you need talk," she continued in the same whisper. "I meant to dine . . . and then I was afraid of tiring you, so I dined alone. But it was so . . ." Unable to find the word she wanted, Joan shivered and began to eat her pear. "I thought I'd just creep in and . . . warm myself."

"But you didn't dress on purpose for that? On a night like this, too."

"Don't you like it?" The disappointment in her

voice betrayed what store she set by this humble effort to repay him. "I wanted to please you, so I made myself as 'presentable' as I could." Scrambling to her feet, she stood for his inspection in a film of grey chiffon. "I don't like being called an 'untidy female,'" she added with a mirthless attempt at gaiety.

"Sorry! The *dress* is delicious, . . . but I, who don't usually feel the cold, simply can't keep warm to-day, and your arms and shoulders and back are absolutely bare. If you *want* to please me, Joan, you would put on just a little flesh. What did you have for dinner?"

"Oh, heaps and heaps of things, . . . but I've not been sleeping well. . . . That's one reason why I came here: I'm so terrified of being alone that I thought, if I could be with you for a little bit first . . ."

As her face puckered suddenly at the prospect of another night of waking loneliness and sleeping mockery, Millbank caught her fingers and drew her to him:

"You're not going to break down when you've been so brave?"

"I won't! I promise I won't!" she cried. "You've cured me, but I'm not used to things yet."

As she pressed close to him for protection, Millbank laid her head against his shoulder and caught up the silk sofa-cover to wrap round her shoulders. This was a job for her mother; and he felt but a poor hand at it.

"D'you believe now that you *do* still matter to some one?" he asked; but Joan was already asleep.

When he roused her at midnight, she looked about her with such terror in her eyes that he realized for the first time something of her week's agony.

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"Oh, it's you! . . . I've not been *dining* here, have I?" she asked, as she caught sight of the disordered table.

"No, but my sixteenth part of a joint servant doesn't clear away till the morning. Joan, I *think* I ought to take you home now. It's rather late for you to be here."

"It's . . . rather late for me . . . to be thinking about that."

For better or worse, Millbank found a marked change, even after four-and-twenty hours: Joan was one stage nearer the end of her trance when she no longer wished to tell the whole world that Curtis Anker had been her lover; but the new, bitter humility was no nearer the normal than had been her former hysterical exultation.

"Dear *child*, you mustn't talk like that! Listen to me! While you've been sleeping, I've been going on with what I was thinking when you came in. . . . It's a strange business that you and I, who never met till last night . . . I want you to feel that there's some one who will see you through whatever happens. Later on . . . you'll find that, however much you suffer in one direction, there's still enjoyment—happiness, even—in others; you won't believe that now, and I shan't try to hurry you. As yet you don't *want* to be happy again, you don't think it's possible. When you do . . . You're becoming very precious to me since you shewed you were ready to trust me; if you ever think there's any way in which I can make you happy . . . Now I'm going to see you home."

When Millbank entered his dining-room for breakfast next morning, he found Joan curled in an arm-chair, with *The Times* open on her knees; she remained

without speaking until noon and then walked dreamily away; at five she returned, asking with a puzzled frown whether she had been there before that day, and remained until eleven. Though she hardly spoke, Millbank found her listening with attention to random anecdotes of Eton and King's, the Lowland Light Infantry as he had known it in peace and the city as he had found it on leaving the army. Of the Lowland Light Infantry when he rejoined it in 1914 he refrained from speaking until she should ask him for stories of Curtis Anker; and he had every reason to keep the conversation away from Curtis and to talk, instead, of his mother and sisters in Cheshire.

"Are you going to them for your leave?" Joan asked, in her single interruption.

"I might run up for a day or two when you've gone to Devonshire," he answered casually.

The following day he received a letter containing only half his name, a third of his address and no signature. "*You ought to go to your mother. I feel you're staying here for me. I can really get on all right now.*" . . .

In spite of the letter she came in half-way through dinner that night and, after walking behind his chair and touching his shoulder, stretched herself on the hearth-rug and lay, open-eyed and brooding, with her chin on her fists. The next day she did not come at all; the day after, she telephoned to know if she might lunch with him before leaving for the country.

"I'm going to Paris as soon as the conference opens," she explained, with new business-like resolution. Then she turned her back on him and gazed out of window. "When I'm a bit steadier, I shall try to tell you all you've done for me. I've only been half awake lately,

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but I *believe* you once said you'd do anything I asked you. Isn't that right? Well, there's very little *I* can do for *you*, but there's nothing at all, in the whole world, I *wouldn't* do for you. . . . I'm not going to call you 'Captain Millbank' any more. I want to thank you, . . . Bertie; you've cured me of breaking down . . . and you've made me feel I *do* matter . . . and you've been a wonderful friend. Curtis would thank you, if he could." . . .

As she shook hands instead of giving him her usual impulsive kiss, Millbank felt that she had come out of her trance. As he watched her walking quickly up St. James' Street, he felt that, for the present at least, she was walking out of his life and wondered whether he wanted to recapture her. All his life he had been a spectator, studying and classifying types, but never joining in their game. The war itself was nothing but a vast psychological revolution; and he was always watching for the development or retrogression of peace types at the war-test. Joan Prendergast, "twenty—very nearly," begotten of the twentieth century and brought to birth by the war, a girl who had begun life at the wrong end, was one of his most interesting specimens. If he did not join in her game, he could not remain indifferent to her prowess. She had a disabling knack of hitting a man over the heart without seeming to move; and even a spectator would miss her.

Perhaps it was all for the best that he should not fall more deeply in love with her while her soul was still bowed over Curtis Anker's grave.

CHAPTER FIVE

ADJUSTMENT

" . . . When the days of golden dreams had perish'd,
And even Despair was powerless to destroy,
Then did I learn how existence could be cherish'd,
Strengthen'd and fed without the aid of joy.

Then did I check the tears of useless passion—
Wean'd my young soul from yearning after thine;
Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten
Down to that tomb already more than mine."

—EMILY BRONTË: *Remembrance*.

SOUL and body, youth, hope . . ."

At such a time, in such a place, Joan could not imagine why the words flamed across her memory; then a single shadowy corner of the arrival platform recreated for her the scene of eighteen months before, when Curtis came to meet her at Paddington and she melted into his arms, unmindful of the onlookers, promising herself to him and praying for more to give him. Curtis, still frightened to accept her gift, had fastened on the word "hope"; and she had refused to explain it, though—for all her ignorance—she realized, too well to tell him, that, in giving the whole of her heart, she had disdained to keep back anything of which to make a new life for herself if disaster overtook him.

Paddington, Reading, Westbury, Taunton: the familiar landmarks must be trying to persuade her

that she was at least resuming an older life; but, if Joan had ever fancied that she could behave as though Curtis was a figure in a dream, the fancy had been destroyed in the moment when her train moved away from the platform. The girls of the department had given a farewell tea-party in her honour; Miss Fawley, talking grandiloquently of an engagement to act for a film-company, little Miss Pearson, whispering confidences about a hat-shop, and Mrs. Ranger predicting vast changes in the department, had come to see her off. They had all said "good-bye . . . for the *present*," but Joan knew that it was good-bye for ever, unless they met fortuitously.

There was no hope of making a new life; but merely to exist involved adaptation to environment, and her mind was busily reviewing the kind of environment that would be tolerable. Not the old department in St. James' Park, with its haunting associations; not the long chain of other people's houses, which she had visited hitherto for something to describe in her letters to Curtis; not, so far as she could foresee, the old discordant surroundings of her home in Devonshire. Perhaps a few months in Paris, with new work and a new background, would give her a new sense of values; but the first stage in adjustment seemed to consist in discarding whatever was linked with her old life.

Thanks to the sympathetic care of Bertie Millbank, she was able to stand alone without disgracing herself; but solitude was harder to bear in places where she had never before felt alone. In Devonshire, when the family was assembled in force, she counted indeed for no more than a piece of furniture at any time; but, as furniture, she was now superfluous and intrusive: Mrs. Prendergast sentimentally gathered her children

about her for Christmas, they had undoubtedly been collected "to say good-bye to Joanie before she goes to Paris"; but they came under protest and went with relief. Mr. Prendergast, worsted in his encounter with the destiny that had given him asthma, was ever on the look-out for easier triumphs; he had not forgotten that his youngest daughter had made of the war an excuse for leaving home; he would never allow himself to forgive her for achieving even temporary independence. Her brothers found her a useful slave; her sisters seemed to include her in their general hatred of family life.

"It may all be different now," Joan told herself delusively. "Now that Margaret and Dossie are married . . ." She remembered, with a stab, that for twelve months her two eldest sisters had not invited her to their houses, though she was working in London within a mile of them. When she had chanced upon social success, they tried to use her as a stepping-stone; or so Irene Prendergast explained their sudden brief amiability, when Joan was in a position to squeeze one or two of her own nominees into inaccessible houses. "*Rene is fond of me, . . . though she's terribly cynical.*"

Fearing to become cynical herself, Joan dismissed her relations from her mind until she saw her third sister in the fitful light of a station lamp.

"You've not come to meet me in all this rain?" she cried.

"A little fresh air will be good for me after two days with our male parent," Irene answered sombrely, leading the way to a ramshackle pony-cart. "You're in luck over this Paris job; but you'll be a fool if you

come back here when it's over. I tried . . . when I left the hospital. It just can't be done."

"What *will* you do?"

Irene laughed and, for the present, contented herself with a critical analysis of Burdon Court and of the Prendergast family from the moment when its head retired from business.

"This place was advertised in *Country Life* as a 'gentleman's seat,' and poor father imagined that all he had to do was to buy it." During the years before their migration from Yorkshire Joan remembered little more than a fair country made hideous by industry, though she fancied that her father, in surroundings that to him at least were congenial, had been contented and, in a rough way, loveable; her mother, in those days, she remembered chiefly as dividing her time between the care of an extensive family and a stealthy rivalry of display with her father's associates in business. When Mr. Whitburgh, the owner of a neighbouring foundry, exchanged his horses for a car, Mrs. Prendergast persuaded her husband to buy a bigger car; when the eldest Whitburgh boy was sent to Repton, the eldest Prendergast was entered at Rugby; and, when May Whitburgh was despatched to London in the care of an aunt, with instructions to enjoy herself regardless of expense, Dossie Prendergast was attached to a party of school-friends and shipped to Paris and Rome in search of culture. The competition only came to an end when the two foundries amalgamated and the Prendergasts seized the opportunity of being bought out at a moment when the education of the children seemed of greater importance than a local triumph. "If he'd hung on a bit longer, we shouldn't always have been short of money," said Irene, with

bitter memories of maintaining cloth-of-gold appearances on a home-spun allowance.

"His health wouldn't stand it. And he *did* do his best for us all," Joan ventured in the obstinate conviction, taught her by association with Curtis, that happiness was the prerogative of those who gave more to life than they took out.

"If you said he *meant* well, . . ." Irene rejoined and continued her destructive analysis. Not only was their money unequal to their pretensions; their careful breeding was from utility to ornament. Until the war, none of them had been allowed to work, though Joan was permitted to study architecture and decoration as her elder sisters had killed time with music and book-binding. Mr. Prendergast would be publicly disgraced if the Whitburghs heard that his daughters were reduced to earning their own livings, when they might be bartering their looks for social advancement. "I think I really *shall* fix things up with Felix Antrim: he's better than nothing, and as father always thinks we're too grand for the people we *want* to marry . . . What about you, Joan? You ought to have met some one passable in the last year or two."

"I shall never marry," Joan answered quietly.

"Rubbish! You can't be a clerk all your days; and you'll die if you come back here. . . . That's one of the ideas the war has knocked on the head: it's not natural to live at home, when you're grown-up, however pretty-pretty it may seem. We're beginning to realize that we've only one life; and we must make the best of it. That's the answer to all the books and plays and papers that are always trying to find out what the 'modern girl' is like. She can't afford *not* to be married, even if she doesn't find the right man.

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You oughtn't to have any difficulty, because every one likes you and you're worth the whole lot of us put together. It's a pity the Anker man has a wife, . . . though he's old enough to be your father." . . .

Joan looked in desperation along the winding drive to the low, half-timbered front of Burdon Court: a moment more, and she would have been spared the necessity of answering.

"I'm afraid it's no use thinking of him," she answered. "You didn't see . . . he was killed in that last Valenciennes fighting. . . . Thanks ever so much for coming to meet me, Rene."

The unexpected turn which her sister had given to the conversation taught Joan that she was still capable of being not only surprised but hurt; and she hurried blindly to her room without pausing to wonder who was in the house or to remember that she was come there in an experimenting mood to see whether she could again make it her home. Bertie Millbank had told her more than once that she ought not to live alone; and, however much she might whisper to Curtis through set teeth that she would win through single-handed, she realized in self-tormenting scorn that she had been going from Leslie Cornwallis to Alec Henson, from Reggie Bagshot to Bertie Millbank to find any one who could give her an hour's companionship. It was not a matter for pride; but Curtis, who understood everything, *must* understand that she was not made of iron. In other days, when her father's threadbare jests and grumbles—the one passed imperceptibly into the other—had rasped her nerves, Curtis could always make her forget: at times it seemed almost useless to tell anything to a man who knew it all beforehand.

"I wonder . . ."

Standing half-undressed in front of a long mirror, Joan asked herself for the thousandth time what he or any other man could see in her. Pretty eyes, pretty teeth, . . . but no better than a hundred other girls could shew; nothing of Margaret's beauty or Dossie's majesty; nothing, in manner, of Rene's funny blend of petulance and humour. She was good-tempered; but, when you were in love, how could you be anything else? She wanted to please Curtis in everything; if he said that it was a crime for her to hide such arms and shoulders, she must dress to gratify him even though she felt herself freezing under her skimpy strip of chiffon. . . .

Eighteen months before, she had stood, as now, examining her own flushed reflection and wondering what she could have done to arouse his interest. Her bookcase shewed the gap where the *History of English Furniture* was wont to stand; the *History* was still on her writing-table, the place marked by a coloured sketch of her ideal dining-room. Swift and strong as an eagle, Curtis had swooped down and carried her aloft in his talons; her interrupted work lay as she had left it.

"And I've . . . come back," she whispered in amazement.

And, whatever people might say in books, there was neither wrinkle nor white hair to witness the agony of her fall from the eagle's grasp. Irene found no change in her; the rest of the family would push her back into place, like her neglected *English Furniture*.

"That train of yours was late," Mr. Prendergast muttered impatiently as Joan ran downstairs to find him standing, detached, morose and as incongruous

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as a plump, elderly fox-terrier in coat and trousers, waiting for dinner to be announced. "What have you been doing to your hair?"

"I had it bobbed," she explained. "D'you like it?"

"As you've had it done without consulting me, it doesn't matter whether I like it or not; but, if you're paying me the compliment of asking my opinion, I'll tell you that I *don't* like that dress. Indecent, I call it. . . . Mother, why d'you *allow* her to dress like any little good-for-nothing? . . ."

Mrs. Prendergast laid down her inseparable knitting and looked from the offending dress to her offended husband; then she shrugged her massive shoulders and returned to her work without being drawn into taking sides.

"It happens to be the fashion," drawled Irene from behind the protection of an arm-chair and an illustrated paper.

"And if it's the fashion to walk about stark-naked—Joan's not much better now——" her father was beginning with fine sarcasm, when dinner was announced.

As might have been foreseen by any one with experience of Mr. Prendergast's moods and methods, the temporary check dammed a richer stream of criticism against the moment when the servants were out of the room. Joan, however, was only concerned to keep her mouth curbed when people attacked a dress which Curtis had chosen. If *he* had not said that her wretched arms were beautiful . . .

"I wonder what people would think if *I* stripped to the waist," Mr. Prendergast hazarded in the interval between the soup and the fish. "You'll be painting yourself with woad next," he added, as the fish-plates

were carried away, "if that happens to be the fashion. . . . Hullo! I thought you must be dining out," he exclaimed, as his two elder daughters entered with a murmured apology.

Counting the chairs for the first time, Joan deduced that her brothers-in-law had once again been prevented from coming to Burdon Court: her memory told her, indeed, that Philip Barton and Jack Grayson were unlikely to return till her father ceased to speak of them as "conceited puppies" or "hair-splitting lawyers." Her brothers, presumably, were still with the army of occupation; but Joan's interest in her relations had been killed by the conditions in which they had grown up.

"I came *without* a maid, just to save you trouble," retorted Dossie Barton, "so I've had to do everything myself. . . . No soup, thanks. No fish, either. . . . How long do you expect to be in Paris, Joan?"

"I'm afraid I've no idea."

"And what are you going to do afterwards?" demanded Margaret Grayson.

"I've no idea about that either."

"You seem as vague as ever," Mrs. Prendergast commented dispassionately.

Joan shrugged her shoulders and clung to such assets of personality as any one would leave her. Vague she might be, never knowing what she wanted; spiritless she might be, never fighting to win her dues of life, as her sisters had done; and perhaps she lacked decency in wearing a low-cut dress, perhaps she was wholly abandoned. At least she was liked by a few people for her sweetness of temper; and, if all combined to bait her, she was in danger of losing that last treasure.

Rather than lose it, she would say good-bye to Bur-

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don Court. Furtively testing the atmosphere of the room, Joan discovered that her experimenting mood had forsaken her; already her mind was made up. Four years earlier, in the first months of the war, before any of them had found an escape in marriage or work, they had sat so often in these opposing double rows, through so many hours of alternate silence and muffled explosion. Courted abroad and snubbed at home, her sisters atoned for their artificial gaiety in other people's houses by their more than normal depression in their own. With Dossie, with Margaret, now with Rene, the natural desire for escape had been complicated with predatory indignation against any one with a longer purse or a more amusing life; and, in seeking their husbands, they seemed only to be guided by a vindictive desire to get the better of somebody else and to make the world pay for their disappointments and humiliations.

"Soul and body, youth, hope . . ." Joan whispered. She had learned to despise calculation; but her father might make her forget the lesson. "If I became bitter, grasping . . ."

"I suppose that mysterious department will come to an end now," Mr. Prendergast confided to his plate.

For a year he had been ostentatiously resigned to the arrogant obstinacy of his youngest daughter in sheltering herself behind an alleged oath of secrecy and refusing to tell even her own father what work she was supposed to be doing.

"Yes. Several people have had notice already. Captain Henson says he thinks I shall be able to stay on after the conference, if I want to."

"For good?" Mr. Prendergast raised his head with a jerk and looked at Joan with affronted amaze-

ment. "You propose to become a clerk . . . in London . . . living by yourself . . . ?"

"As she's been doing for the last eighteen months," interrupted Irene. "The war's altered all that kind of thing, father."

"I don't know what 'all that kind of thing' may be, but I do know that many things which were necessary in the war won't be necessary now the war's over. When a girl doesn't know even how to dress herself decently . . . When you come back from Paris, you'll please have the goodness to consult *me* about your movements."

With the fate of her Paris mission no longer in doubt, Joan found her self-control weakening. After Paris, if she returned to Burdon Court, she could look forward to an endless repetition of this scene, with one grievance after another, one jest after another, worn threadbare by a man once vigorous in brain and body, now uprooted from his old surroundings and not acclimatized to the new. She could look forward to seeing her mother sitting, as now, in a vast, all-embracing indifference, worn out, apparently, by the effort of bearing seven children and of ordering three meals a day for thirty years. Transplanted too late in life, they took no part in the society which, twelve years earlier, they had aspired to enter; flung into idleness enforced before they had learned the use of leisure, they endured from day to day, purposeless and bored, until they had lost interest even in their own children. Rene was right; the "modern girl" had learned from the war that family love must be earned, not assumed; between age and youth a once universal relationship had become an anachronism. Joan won-

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dered why she had tried for so long to nourish affection for people who did not desire it.

"When I come back from Paris, the first thing I shall want will be a holiday," she announced. "I shall make London my headquarters, though I expect to stay with people a certain amount. After that . . ." Joan summoned her resolution and looked her father in the eyes. Irene was smiling at this first flicker of revolt; Dossie and Margaret, who might have offered to be responsible for her, were still sulking from their earlier rebuke. "I shall see if my department can find me anything worth having; if not, I must . . . look . . . somewhere . . . else." . . .

By dragging out her sentence until the servants returned to put the dessert-plates on the table, Joan secured a moment's respite for herself; and, when her father was able to speak, time had driven down the temperature of the discussion.

"You . . . seem to be taking a great deal upon yourself," he commented.

"I'm only doing what's natural," Joan answered gently. "There's nothing for me to do down here, and after having my own money and being mistress of my own time . . ."

"You consider it natural to wash your hands of us?" asked her father. "If you don't find work, you won't expect any help from *here*?"

"I don't expect any help from any one," Joan answered.

Though her tone was innocent of defiance, she experienced a savage delight in defiantly admitting, for the first time since Curtis Anker's death, that she was alone and without hope, that she would continue alone and without hope. This last hour had disabused

her mind of its vague, lingering belief that her family could help her or that she owed any obligations to her family. It was something gained to know that she stood alone: henceforward for the rest of her life, without hindrance or help, she could devote all her energies to forgetting the few months in which she had been touched with divinity and raised above the animals of the field and these human animals of the fire-side.

"I think this subject has been discussed quite fully enough," said Mrs. Prendergast, as she walked with heavy tread and swaying carriage to the door.

Dossie and Margaret followed quickly, struggling for an inch of precedence. Irene smiled to herself and took Joan's hand.

"I think you're absolutely right," she murmured. "But I wish to heaven you hadn't started this racket on your first night."

Their father remained behind to drink a second glass of port wine, then shut himself up in his study with a detective story.

Four days later Joan crossed to Paris. The relief of escaping from Devonshire and the excitement of visiting independently a city which she knew only as a straitly-guarded schoolgirl changed, at first sight of the Majestic, to dutiful preoccupation with the work on which Alec Henson and she stood to be judged. He was so glad to see her, so maternal when she was disgracefully sea-sick, that she vowed her best efforts to make the conference a personal triumph for him. Though, for the first week, no one seemed to want them, Joan kept her mind occupied at night with fancies of a deadlock at Versailles and of an appeal by Mr. Lloyd George and Sir Henry Wilson to their

War Office experts. "*This memorandum is too important to be disregarded,*" she usually made the prime minister say; "*Who's responsible for it?*" Then Sir Henry Wilson would beckon to a secretary and answer: "*Captain Henson.*" "*Send for him at once, please,*" the prime minister would order. And sometimes, as Joan sat in their room at the Majestic, waiting for work, she would add a pendant to the story and make Alec drive, white-faced, to the hotel and say: "*It's you they want; I told them you'd done all the donkey-work for that memorandum.*" . . . Whirled to Versailles, Joan pictured herself directing the conference with equal composure and efficiency, accepting a chair from President Wilson, translating her answers into French for the benefit of Signor Orlando and causing Mr. Balfour to murmur in the prime minister's ear: "*An uncommonly able young woman . . .*"

This day-dream was the latest of many which Joan had invented to fill the place of all that she had imagined while Curtis was still with her. In rendering it convincing to Henson without making herself absurd, she found a harder task than if she had in fact been summoned to direct the conference. After their high hopes for the work of a department which they had served so long and faithfully, they were to discover that they were unappreciated, perhaps unknown, certainly unremarked among the horde of delegations that poured into the Majestic, each with its own retinue of secretaries and typewriters, its equipment of tin-boxes and its bland assumption that no one else mattered. The memoranda, the statistics and plans, laboriously compiled at the orders of their superiors, were brushed aside with a request for "the shortest possible abstract"; when the abstract had been pre-

pared, it was buried under a pile of similar papers from half a hundred other cells of their busy little hive; and they endured the mortification of seeing the representatives of their department entering the conference with no knowledge of the subjects on which they were to fight daily, pitched battles.

"I've asked to be sent home," Henson announced after a month of expensive inactivity; "and I've told our worthy chief that you want *real* work in England. It was a private letter, of course, and he sees fit to be funny; can't make out why we're not having the time of our lives. . . . Paris, the spring . . . and the poor devil of a tax-payer standing the shot. . . . Come and have some lunch."

In accepting the curt invitation, Joan had to make allowances for Henson's disappointment and for his impatience at being kept idle in Paris when business interests in Scotland were calling him home. Of late she had heard much of an estate in Clackmannan and of coal-mines in Lanarkshire; describing his mother, who lived in Wiltshire, he predicted that she and Joan would fall in love with each other; and, if at first he talked to make conversation, she suspected that he was now trying to stir a more personal concern. Communication thereafter became an exercise in tight-rope-walking, with the certainty of bruises if she discussed their work and with the threat of broken bones if she allowed him to become more intimate. Already he had slipped into calling her "Joan"; it would be dastardly if her selfish craving for companionship encouraged him to fall in love with her.

"I wonder who we shall find to-day," Joan murmured, as they set out.

The innocent verbiage headed him off the deserted

little restaurant for which he was steering and sent him towards the Ritz. From north, south, east and west, the representatives of all the powers engaged in the war were pouring down upon Paris with diverse, glittering retinues; ejected from Versailles by the Big Ten and swelled by the yet more ruthless ejections of the Big Four, they drifted picturesquely about the streets and lounged conspiratorially in the hotels at the expense of their governments, idle or mischievous, sullen or philosophical according to their temperaments, but uniformly futile and for the most part bored.

By pretending an ingenuous interest in meaningless names, Joan preserved her balance on the tight-rope.

When the despised plenipotentiaries had served their turn, she sought distraction in the further horde that descended on Paris from England, eager to follow the changed centre of political interest, to give parties and to fancy that the lines of the peace were being drawn at a chain of luncheon-tables on the fringe of the conference. Visiting the Ritz daily at half-past twelve, Joan examined the new arrivals, arranged expeditions with old friends and found herself passed from hand to hand by a promiscuous crowd of holiday-makers whose very names had to be taken on trust. One day she found her brother-in-law, Jack Grayson, shepherding a flock of legal assessors; on another her two brothers hurried through Paris on their way from Cologne; and Irene telephoned to say that she was married and had come to buy clothes. **It** was all deliciously exciting; and, though her relations were too much preoccupied to trouble about her, Joan contrived to be so busy that she had no time to think. If she was not happy, she wore an infectious air of happiness;

and, in becoming a part of other people's lives, she forgot her own individuality.

"Alec, a man I don't know from Adam wants us to dine with him to-night," she confided breathlessly, when Henson returned from ordering a table. "I've said I'll telephone, but you *must* find out his name for me. He's with Leslie Cornwallis."

Her escort looked across the room to a party of four and smiled to himself:

"That's old Frank Wharton. You *do* know him, because I remember hearing you spouting poetry to him at dinner somewhere. You'd much better dine with me, or you'll be horribly in the way. When he has Isabel Mordaunt to talk to, Frank has no eyes for any one else; so with Leslie Cornwallis and Beatrice Anker."

At the news that she was for the first time in the same room as Curtis Anker's widow, Joan's forgotten individuality returned to her; the trance into which Paris had thrown her came to a harsh end; as though she had been publicly denounced, she felt herself changing colour.

"I wouldn't . . . spoil sport . . . for anything," she answered with an effort.

When the eyes of Wharton's party swept the doorway, she braced herself for defiance; and, as laughter and conversation rushed in upon the fancied silence, Joan found her hands trembling with rage that this woman could chatter gaily to one man when she had poisoned the life of another for six interminable years.

"Then you'll dine with me? We . . . can talk about that job," Henson added, as she hesitated.

"Oh, I should simply love to!" Joan cried in fervent thankfulness at her escape.

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So great was her dread of being confronted with Mrs. Anker that she pretended a headache and of her own accord asked Henson to find her a quiet restaurant. Paris was not big enough to hold the girl who had loved Curtis and the woman who had been his evil genius; as they drove away from their hotel, she plunged into a discussion of work and throughout dinner she brought up new arguments for being allowed to return home.

"I see no point in throwing up one job till you've made sure of another," Henson pointed out with unanswerable force.

"This is temporary. If I go back before every one has got in ahead of me . . ." Joan improvised.

"I certainly shan't stand in your way. I . . . wish you didn't regard a government office as the height of human ambition." . . .

"I must have money to live on. . . . You see, I've . . . more or less run away from home; and as I've made up my mind *never* to marry . . ."

"Aren't you . . . a little young to have done that?"

Before she had time to remember her danger, his proposal assailed her; and for half an hour Joan had to struggle with his pleading.

"I shall never marry," she told him again and again. "Can't we be friends?" His silence struck a new terror of loneliness into her as she realized that she must never again accept a man's sympathy for fear that it might ripen into love. "Let's . . . let's be friends! We've worked together so long! You've been so wonderfully patient and good with me. . . . I shouldn't make you happy if I couldn't give you all my love. . . . And I don't seem to have the faculty of loving." . . .

As her voice died away, Joan guessed that Alec was asking himself savagely why he had not trusted his own first judgement when, twenty minutes after hearing of her dearest friend's death, she went out to a party and he, with insight which he had disregarded, diagnosed her as a girl without a heart. . . .

Cut off from home, cut off from work, cut off from companionship, she carried back to London her unfinished task of adjusting herself to life.

CHAPTER SIX

A LOGICAL CONCLUSION

The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books—
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway: one step aside,
They're classed and done with.

—ROBERT BROWNING: *Bishop Blougram's Apology*.

I BELIEVE there's a . . . conspiracy to keep me out of work!"

Foregoing her holiday, Joan had devoted three months after her return from Paris to looking for employment among friends who were equally convinced that none was to be had, that she was not seriously in need of money and that she would have a more amusing time by abandoning the search.

"Well, will you let me ask Mr. Davis what he thinks?" enquired Miss Fawley, who was celebrating her first triumph in film-production by assembling her former allies for tea at Rumpelmayer's.

The government service, Mrs. Ranger explained, offered no hope; commerce, from the angle of Miss Pearson's hat-shop, was overstaffed and precarious; the city was filled with the outpourings of the public offices; and the whole of England seemed at the same moment to have glutted itself with governesses, secretaries and companions.

"If I hear of anything . . ." wrote Mrs. Ferguson. *"I never see you nowadays."* . . .

Joan pursed her lips and continued to give Hans Place a wide berth till these kindly, rich people learned to regard her as a girl who had to earn her own living.

"Work is for workmen," expounded Reggie Bagshot: *"come and dine."*

And in three months, with her slender savings inexorably ebbing, Joan had given one course of lessons in French conversation to a Foreign Office aspirant and decorated two flats for clients recommended by Bertie Millbank. Only one had remembered to pay her; and she could count the weeks before she sponged on her sisters or made a prodigal's return to Burdon Court.

Providence interposed Miss Fawley between Joan and Bertie. If the worst came to the worst, she might have to seek his help; but she had determined, ever since her disastrous experience with Alec Henson, never to put herself under obligation to a man. If Leslie Cornwallis or Reggie Bagshot took her to a play, she paid for her dinner and ticket by giving them companionship which they valued at least as highly as she valued theirs; Bertie was one of the tiresome people who always wanted to give without taking. . . .

"If Mr. Davis won't feel I'm simply wasting his time . . ." she began.

Confident of her own powers, Miss Fawley arranged a meeting that afternoon in Mr. "Jumbo" Davis' flat: if *she* could play a leading part after six months' training, others could do the same; and Joan was beginning to see herself as the successor of Mary Pickford when her suave Jewish host moderated her transports by

confessing that he had only a financial interest in film-production.

Greater disappointments were to follow when Joan visited the Millennium Picture Players in Berwick Street for her "test." An alert young American, flanked by silent but watchful colleagues of less thorough-bred nationality, required her to "register" her emotion in learning, first, that her husband had been unfaithful to her; secondly that her father—contrary to expectation—had not been ruined by Wall Street rivals; thirdly—by an irony which Joan considered unnecessary—that her lover had been killed on the eve of their wedding. Though complimented at the end on her versatility as an actress, she was warned that she lacked the features of "a good screen-face."

Though Miss Fawley's offer of help was unproductive, her indomitable good-will manifested itself in persistent invitations which Joan could find no gracious means of refusing. For several weeks she discovered herself in astonishing parties that began anywhere and anyhow, swelling steadily in noise and numbers, reforming for breakfast at a cabman's shelter and ending in casual recuperation at the nearest flat to which any member had access. The inhabitants of the cinematograph world, assembled from a social class of their own and speaking their own language, seemed to be establishing their own social technique; their rules aimed at a Bohemianism more unconfined than that of the stage, more vaguely sinister than that of artistic Chelsea. Under Bagshot's persuasive leadership, Joan explored a weary underworld of pleasure-seekers, half-hoping to learn their knack of thoughtless enjoyment and wholly fascinated by contact with the raw material of sensational films and novels. Had not Bertie

Millbank told her that she had begun life at the wrong end and was learning backwards?

As her powers of discernment and classification matured, Joan tired of these tawdry revels with rich young men and voracious girls. Instinct warned her that she would have been ashamed to be seen in their company by Mrs. Ferguson; and her sense of values was sharpened when she realized that Reggie Bagshot was her only friend of the war-period to drift into these mirthless gatherings. Though he amused her with his buffoonery, she could not give him the implicit trust which she imposed in Cornwallis or Millbank; though he had served in the same battalion as Curtis, she never felt wholly safe with him since the day when he invited her to the Grand National and suggested that they should spend two nights in Chester. His language and manner were impeccable; but a different kind of party would have been proposed if she had not been living in rooms by herself or associating with girls so generally emancipated as Miss Fawley.

"And yet . . . I've only myself to blame if I've given him a wrong impression," she reflected.

To Reggie, it was a logical conclusion that a bachelor girl should enjoy every freedom permitted to a bachelor; and, as she discarded one convention after another, Joan sometimes wondered what else was left her. Companionship she must have; but she was avoiding Bertie for fear of his falling in love with her, and her newer friends did not give without expectation of a return. She was nerving herself to forego companionship of every kind when Bagshot appeared with an invitation to the first Warriors' Ball.

"And, if you don't come, I must go home and play

cribbage with my cruel stepmother," he lamented. "Jumbo Davis is arranging the funeral. Dinner in his flat; but he won't let me in unless I bring a partner. Be a sport!"

Against her better judgement, Joan allowed herself to be driven to Clarges Street. The prelude to the party could be heard from the pavement, in gusts of laughter and snatches of song. Inside, Mr. Jumbo Davis was dispensing cocktails with a heartiness which suggested that his share had not been confined to mixing them for his friends; a glassy-eyed youth, acclaimed by the others as "Billiam," sprawled across the arms of a chair, declaiming poetry. In the shadowy background by the windows, a silent girl, with a satirical smile and a manner of aggressive contempt for Billiam, drifted to and fro, smoking cigarettes and experimenting with a pile of new gramophone records, while Miss Fawley, cross-legged on a vast yellow cushion by the fireplace, waved a glass in one hand and beat time, with the other, to the abruptly changing music.

"I expect you know every one," said Mr. Davis, as he came forward with a tray of glasses. "Oh, won't you have one?"

"Thanks, I'm afraid I never take them," Joan answered.

"They're quite mild," said Miss Fawley, as she stretched her hand up to the tray. "And much too good to waste. I'll toss you odd-man-out for Miss Prendergast's! Come on, Billiam! Reggie! Jumbo! Fay! Who's got any money?"

"M' search *me*," replied Billiam thickly.

"Money?" repeated Bagshot. "I've heard the word,

of course. . . . Well, if I make each of you a small advance, you'll pay me back, won't you?"

By the time that each had been presented with a shilling, Mr. Davis discovered that Billiam had surreptitiously consumed the disputed cocktail; and, while the others collected round him to mete out punishment, Miss Fawley picked up the scattered shillings and secreted them in her shoe. As soon as Bagshot discovered the theft, he removed both shoes and tossed them on top of a high bookcase, threatening that Miss Fawley's stockings would follow if he had any more trouble with her and dropping the shillings between her wriggling shoulder-blades with the statement that, if she wanted money, she should have it. The servant who came to announce dinner waited impassively till he could make his voice heard and then threw open the double-doors with a practised absence of emotion.

Dazed by the noise and movement, Joan sheltered herself first by the side of Miss Fawley, who confided that, if Billiam drank another drop of anything, he would, as usual, be sick; then she transferred herself to the sardonic girl, who informed her that, while Jumbo Davis was not technically drunk, he had not been entirely sober for a week and that, as their revels were only beginning, it would be interesting to see what the men would be like at the end of dinner.

"And Betty Fawley, if it comes to that," she added, as an intermittent fall of shillings trickled to the floor. "You and I are the only really sober ones at present. Is your name Prendergast? I couldn't quite hear. . . . Mine's Fay Allport. You going on to this ball?"

"Not if they're . . . like this," Joan answered with

a shudder, as Miss Fawley rocked dizzily for a moment before hurrying to her place in the dining-room.

"I can promise you they won't be like this," said Fay Allport grimly, as, before even the soup was served, their glasses were charged with champagne.

Pushing hers aside, Joan asked for soda-water and entered into a murmured conspiracy with Reggie Bagshot to keep Miss Fawley from drinking anything more and, if possible, to extricate her from the dubious protection of Davis and Billiam before she lost control of herself.

"And . . . don't you think it's rather a funny party to bring me to?" she asked with unwonted asperity, as her eyes travelled with blended distaste and fear from the dissipated stockbroker to the unkempt poet and from the hilarious film-actress to the silent enigma at the end of the table.

"A bit . . . Bohemian," Reggie conceded. "But *you* can go anywhere, Joan."

Though his tone indicated a compliment, Joan could not help interpreting the words as an aspersion. A year ago, Reggie would not have dared to throw her into such company; but she had cheapened herself and could not now complain if she was taken at her true valuation. It was the logical conclusion; and, if she dined with Jumbo Davis again, she must expect to be treated with as little respect as these other girls.

Were they, too, cheapening themselves for the privilege of drinking champagne and being taken to dances? Were they, too, afraid of sitting alone in their rooms? Or were they seeking an outlet for unwanted love? With a sidelong glance at Reggie, Joan decided that the vulgarity of his friends was less intolerable than his own obstinate futility. If she could

make something of him, she would once again have a purpose in life. His father and grandfather, as every one knew, were hard-living, hard-drinking gamblers, each with an involved matrimonial history. When once she had made him care for her, she would persuade him away from scenes so draggled as the present; and she would again have some one to cherish. If he wanted her as the price of supplying a new supreme interest, Heaven knew! she was little enough to give nowadays. It was the logical conclusion. . . .

"Reggie, I *don't* know that we'd better go on to this ball," she whispered.

As she looked uncertainly round the table, her opinion was practically confirmed by Fay Allport who slipped to the floor in the middle of one of her own sentences. As Davis and Billiam carried her to a sofa in the sitting-room, Joan hurried after them to take charge of the insensible girl and to protect her from the dispassionate curiosity of Billiam, who observed reassuringly:

"It's nothing! She's often taken like that," and of Betty Fawley, who calculated sagaciously:

"She's only had about two cocktails and one glass of fizz. She must have been filling up earlier in the evening." . . .

Joan threw open the windows and began to loosen her patient's dress.

"The fewer people in here the better," she ordained. "Go back and finish your dinner. We'll come to you as soon as we can."

At the stinging shock of cold water on her forehead and neck, Fay Allport opened her eyes and sat up without difficulty.

"Have I done it again?" she asked. "Sorry to be

such a bore! My heart. I never get any warning, you see. . . . Is there anything to smoke? . . ."

At the end of two cigarettes, she dried her forehead, powdered her nose and walked steadily enough to the folding-doors of the dining-room.

"Oh, *don't* go back there!" Joan cried. "It's so noisy and hot and smoky. Let me take you home!"

"I'm all right now. Besides . . . this is my home."

As she jerked her head upwards, Joan remembered a phrase, at the beginning of dinner, which told her that Billiam occupied the rooms above them.

"Is he . . . a poet?" she asked in the hope of hiding her confusion.

"He thinks he is, but he can't find any one to agree with him. I call him an insufferable little cad. I should have done better with Jumbo; but I don't want Betty to feel I'm poaching."

"But *she's* not . . ." Joan began.

"She's been living with him for the last two years. Jumbo got her taken on for the films; and he can do what he likes with her as long as he likes. Which won't be long, I should imagine; she'd be pretty if she wasn't getting so fat, but she's the stupidest human being God ever allowed to survive."

With an effort, Joan recollected that she had conspired at the beginning of dinner to take the weak and self-indulgent Betty home before she could become helpless with drink and a ready victim for the suave but hungry-eyed young Jew.

Even if her protection had come in time, it was strange that she should try to protect an older girl from doing what the world would think was the same as she had done; stranger that she should feel a guilty curiosity about this scornful and reserved woman who

comported herself with a dignity which even her drunken collapse could not wholly destroy; strangest of all that she should wonder, with flaming cheeks, whether she had herself been tacitly assigned to Reggie.

The question was answered almost before it had been framed.

"No business of mine," Fay Allport observed between smoke-rings, "but, if I were you, I wouldn't become too intimate with the Bagshot boy." . . .

"I don't really know him at all well," Joan answered with a staggering recollection that she had, five minutes before, been spinning abstractions about the logical conclusion to which her life was tending.

"Then I should have thought he was rather a waste of time," Fay drawled. "*Again* it's not my business, but you've taken rather a knock, haven't you?"

Joan sprang to her feet with a denial that died on her lips before she could ask herself whether Millbank or her old landlord had been perfidious enough to betray her.

"How d'you know?" she asked.

"See it in your eyes," Fay answered abruptly. "All right, I don't want to hear about it: other people's tragedies bore me. Recent?"

"Last November," Joan whispered.

"H'm. In your place, I'd look out for some decent man—if there are any—and marry him. It's better than nothing, and I should think men fall in love with you pretty easily. . . . The one thing I've learnt about life is that, when you've tasted blood, you can never forget it. In your place, it would have to be marriage: you're altogether too soft for anything else. . . . Let's go back."

As she stalked across the room and flung open the doors, a radiation of stark power accompanied her; and Joan, freed for a moment from the abrupt domination of a personality as gaunt as the frame that contained it, lingered behind with her eyes on the thin back and wasted arms of a girl who seemed the spectral survivor of a tragedy in which her human self had perished.

"She came to the surface during the war," was all that Reggie could tell her. "Beyond that, well, you'll get more confidences from the first oyster out of a barrel. Is she all right? The others look pretty fairly blotto."

Firm in the knowledge of his own sobriety, he addressed himself to the task of rousing his companions. With the aid of their favourite restoratives—a cigar for Jumbo, old brandy for Billiam "to settle the champagne," as he explained, *sal volatile* for Betty and cold water for Fay—the four least certain members of the party achieved an appearance of melancholy decorum by the time that their host's car arrived. When the others began to dance, Joan stood for a while in an open doorway, allowing the music and the blaze of quickly moving colour to hypnotize her. In a world of masquerade she could forget her fright, forget her troubles, forget her own personality. . . .

"My child, you never look me up nowadays."

Joan felt her hand caught from behind and gently pressed.

"Bertie! Oh, my *dear*, I am so glad to see you!" The latest of her logical conclusions faded from memory; and Joan shut her mind to the fear of finding herself in a false position. The only man within sight who was not wearing fancy dress, Bertie seemed the

one real person in a waking dream. His attitude shewed him to be, as ever, the spectator of life. His grave smile strengthened her with its suggestion of limitless wisdom; and his steady, comfortable voice soothed her as in the days when she climbed on to his chair and fell asleep with her head on his breast. "Come up to our box! There's no one there."

"Why haven't you been to see me?" he asked.

"D'you know, if we hadn't met, I believe I *should* have? I want . . . pulling up."

"D'you find you're going to the bad? I'm sorry about that."

"Darling Bertie, you must be serious! I've had . . . a horribly narrow squeak. You . . . well, you know all about me." . . .

"I know you've the heart and purity of a child."

"Not to-night! I was desperate. There were two women. . . . I felt if . . . if I could matter to any one as these women mattered to their men . . . One of them was talking to me about love as a habit; you can't break yourself of the habit of giving love if you've given it once. I want some one who'll love me and take my love." . . .

As her voice died away in a long sigh, Millbank had to moisten his lips before he could answer:

"That ought not to be so very difficult to find."

"Curtis stands in the way. . . . And yet . . . you can't *always* give your love to a memory, any more than a mother can give her milk to a child that's dead. . . . I felt, if I talked to you, Bertie, you'd be kind and wise."

"I can only repeat what I said the first night we met: you must allow time to bring his own changes. Some day you'll meet a man who'll want your love

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and want to give you his; and in time you won't feel that Curtis is barring the way. In the meantime don't let your theories and discoveries about life run away with you. . . . I must be going in a minute, but I want to say first that, if you'd care to help me in my office, I can take you on in place of a girl who's gone sick."

Scrambling to her feet, Joan threw her arms round Millbank's neck and kissed him with her old impulsiveness.

"Bertie, you're an angel!" she exclaimed.

"My dear, some one will see us!" he whispered as he disengaged her arms.

"What does it matter? There's nothing wrong in kissing, is there? It seemed . . . somehow . . . as if that was all I had to give." . . . Her hazel eyes lost their laughter; and she shook her head till the short black hair danced in the silver light of the arc-lamps. "I wonder sometimes if I know the difference between right and wrong."

"I wonder sometimes if any one does," Millbank answered, as he walked with her to the door of the box.

Of the next five hours Joan remembered little but that she danced with many partners in steadily increasing heat and noise and that dawn broke chillingly upon a scene for which night could have provided the only excuse. Fascinated to the exclusion of disgust, she stood in a corner of the box, watching the last of many suppers: unknown men and women had strayed in, dishevelled and loud-voiced, at the clatter of plates and the drawing of corks; empty pleasantries evoked unmeaning laughter; baseless quarrels flared up and died away. Of all who had attended the far-off dinner in Clarges Street, Reggie and she alone were sober; Fay Allport had fainted twice and was being revived with

an injection administered by Billiam in a respectful and suspicious silence; Betty Fawley, seated on the knees of a stranger, was crying softly because she had not been allowed to help her friend.

With a sudden feeling of nausea, Joan snatched her cloak and ran into the street. In a world of white-faced scavengers and weary cabmen, of harassed door-keepers and authoritative, patient police she stood and filled her lungs with deep draughts of early morning air. "Don't catch cold, miss," a friendly voice counselled; and she discovered that her cloak was still hanging over her arm.

"Curtis . . . Curtis, are you listening?" she whispered as she walked home. "I hope I've done nothing to disgrace you, old man. You made a wonderful picture of me, when the truth was that I was too ignorant to know anything. I've . . . made some . . . funny friends! But I swear to you, Curtis, I'll never do anything to make you ashamed of me. That's about all you've left me, old man." . . .

Five hours later Joan presented herself for the first time at the offices of Millbank Brothers and Currie. With the return of regular employment, the edge of her more poignant discoveries became blunted. By working her to the limits of her strength, Bertie convinced her that she was under no personal obligation to him; and, by introducing her casually to his own engagingly casual friends, he taught her to accept hospitality as carelessly as it was offered. On hearing of the scene with Alec Henson in Paris, he cured her of too great sensitiveness by arranging an encounter and sending them away with friendship recreated; and, forestalling the gossip that would in time gather about a girl who was apparently disowned by her relations, he method-

ically made friends with Joan's brothers-in-law till the Bartons, the Antrims and the Graysons, one after another, threw their belated protection over her.

At the end of six months, the office was at its old strength and Joan had to look for work elsewhere. By this time, however, she had paid her way and put money by without dipping further into her savings. Rene Antrim commissioned her to furnish a flat in London; Lady Henson invited her to decorate a wing of the house in Wiltshire; and, if Bertie ever wanted her again, he would discover that to her former accomplishments she had now added typing and shorthand.

"I'm rather proud of you, young woman," he announced on their last day together.

"If I can only go on working, . . ." Joan began as she pocketed her last month's salary.

"It would do you no harm to have a holiday and meet a few people," Bertie counselled. If his attitude as a spectator stranded him above the swirl of life, he derived rare pleasure from receiving youthful confidences and administering paternal advice. "And it would do me an enormous lot of good if you were to dine with me to-night and do a play."

"But, dear Bertie, of course I will! You must let me just look in at Mrs. Ferguson's afterwards. I feel such a beast to her; she was wonderful to me in the war, and I've not dared to go to her house since . . . that night."

"You feel you *can* go now? That's an improvement. Do people tell you you're looking better?"

"But I haven't been ill."

"Do they make any comment on your looks? If not, I *will*." . . .

"No, you're not to, Bertie; we always quarrel about that. I'm . . . not . . . *bad-looking*." . . .

"On mature consideration I don't think you are. . . . My child, have you any conception what you look like now? I don't mind telling you, because it's beyond the power of man to make you vain." . . .

"But Dossie's the beauty of the family," Joan protested.

"There are times when you make me very angry," said Bertie, as he took her arm and led her over the Mansion House crossing. "To-night at about seven. I'll get tickets for something; and I'll come and call for you."

As her straight, slim back and shapely ankles disappeared down Queen Victoria Street, Bertie felt that the afternoon sunshine had been suddenly driven away. Though she brought him her broken life to mend, he recognized that she would always depend on some one and that he was not indispensable to her. Time would bring his own changes; but, though she was now ready to take up her life again, no one had yet come to fill the place of Curtis.

"I believe she'd marry me . . . out of gratitude," Bertie reflected. No one would ever guess how fiercely he had been tempted to abuse her trust. "Perhaps it's as well that I shan't see her so much: we're becoming a habit to each other. I wonder if she thinks I'm too old. . . . I wonder what *I* should think if I heard some other fellow had jumped my claim." . . .

During dinner, as her grave eyes became wistful at the thought of parting, during the play, as she sat with her hand in his, Bertie tried to tell himself that he ought to be catching the fire of her own generous spirit and thanking heaven for the chance of leading her back

to happiness. In language that could never be used to her, he was making reparation for Curtis and for his sex; and, if he found himself too human for such rarefaction of love, he was at least thankful that he had kept his trust sacred.

"And this . . . is really the end," Joan sighed, as they came out of the theatre. "I've loved working for you, Bertie; and some day, when I'm rich, I shall come back and work for you *without* being paid. Are you coming on to Mrs. Ferguson's? I shall feel . . . less frightened, if you do."

"I . . . think I'd better go home, but I'll drop you."

Unsuspicious that he was denying himself her company, Joan wriggled into comfort and smoothed her tossing hair with a tired hand that slipped into her lap before its mission was accomplished. Though she was little more than half awake when they reached Hans Place, she ran up the steps before her resolution had time to falter. The small rooms were already crowded; and, after six months of retirement, she found herself encircled by an inexorable group of late-comers.

"As I can't dance, it's your moral duty to have supper with me," said Alec Henson; and Joan was too glad of his restored friendship to refuse him.

"After moral duty, what about the immoral pleasure of dancing with me?" proposed Reggie Bagshot.

"If we were to say, 'Missing six' . . . ?" suggested Cornwallis.

With the arrival of supper, Joan refused to commit herself further; but, on her return to the ball-room, the partners who had first engaged her returned clamorously for second dances.

"I've promised this to Mr. Wharton," she explained. "After that, I shall die if I don't go home."

"He's dug himself in behind the last two bottles of the '04 Bollinger," answered Reggie. "Mayn't I have this till he comes?"

"Mayn't I rest till he comes?" Joan begged, as she walked towards an open window.

Life was beginning again. Bertie—dear Bertie!—had always told her that there was a half-doused spark glimmering somewhere within her; somehow, since she failed to die with Curtis, she had always felt that in this beautiful world of stars and summer fragrance she would be happy again; some day, when all mankind was smiling on her, she might even find some one to accept the shrinking tenderness which Curtis had prized.

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive . . ."

Joan shivered with delight at the caressing softness of the flower-laden breeze. Her heart beat time to the quick music behind her; and her spirit danced in memory of the moments when she had moved on air through that shining, joyous scene. She was in love with motion, in love with music, in love with life, in love with love.

"But to be young was very heaven!"

She had not spoken, surely; but a voice was answering. The night was a dream, where the world was filled with laughing whispers. A night of stars, a night of love: its spirit chimed with hers. A dream of ecstasy, but she must steel herself to waking. Some one would come to claim her, some one was already standing by her side, devouring her with his eyes. For all the cool sweetness of the air, Joan felt her cheeks warming; a glow spread through her body till she had

a wild thought that her dress must be burning; and, though her will challenged her to gaze unmoved into the darkness, she felt her head slowly, irresistibly turning.

The first bars of a waltz were being played as she faced the room; and, in her deliberate effort to avoid the unknown eyes, she observed that Reggie Bagshot was lounging in the doorway opposite with the girl whom he had taken down to supper; Alec was borrowing a cigarette from a man whose features were hidden; Leslie Cornwallis was whispering a petition to the leader of the band.

"Miss . . . Prendergast!"

No longer able to stare into the middle distance, Joan allowed herself to take notice of an unknown man at her elbow. His hair was smooth and fair; his eyes were grey. He looked about thirty; and she had never seen him before.

"Yes?"

"I say . . . I hope you won't think it's awful cheek; I want to know if you can possibly spare me a dance. I've been scouring the house for my aunt, so that I could be introduced properly." . . .

"You know, I *ought* to go to bed," Joan pleaded.

"If you're tired, of course I won't press you, but I have to go back to Camberley to-morrow, so this is my only chance. . . . I *should* so love it. . . . If you don't want to dance, perhaps you'll let me give you some supper." . . .

The reference to Camberley stirred a familiar chord in Joan's tired brain.

"Oh, but you're Captain Keithley, aren't you? You're at the Staff College? And the party's being

given for you! I *couldn't* refuse anything to the nephew of the house!"

"Thank God for that!" Jack Keithley exclaimed with disconcerting fervour. "This is almost too good to be true. Now, we'll do whatever you like; and, if you'd care for my aunt to make a ceremonial presentation . . ."

"I should think we could dispense with that," Joan laughed. "You see, we really ought to have met a year and a half ago. . . . D'you remember when your aunt gave a party for you after the last Valenciennes fighting and just before the armistice? I was here then. All leave was cancelled." . . .

"What a memory you have!" he exclaimed, as they glided into the stream of dancers.

"I always find the very first and the very last days of the war most vivid," Joan answered. "The . . . *shock* was greatest then. . . . How much longer have you at the Staff College?"

"I'm half-way through the course. How much longer are you going to be in London? You live here? I hope we're going to meet." . . .

"I, too."

"Again . . . and again . . . and again." . . .

Part Two

Part Two

CHAPTER ONE

INVERCALDY

"She should never have looked at me
If she meant I should not love her!"
—ROBERT BROWNING: *Cristina*.

TO the natives of Invercaldy, Sir William Keithley's three-hundred-year-old mansion was always "the new house." The existing foundations were indeed attributed to the fifteenth century; but tribal memory, careless of precise chronology, was only concerned to register that there had always been a house commanding the lake and in turn commanded by the sloping purple hills which spread and stretched until they faded into the sky-line.

Tribal memory would not contemplate a time when Invercaldy was without a Keithley to rule it. Scottish and English history might remain ignorant or unappreciative; those who judged of a family by the space which it occupied in the *Dictionary of National Biography* might ask impatiently what these Keithleys had contributed to the life of the country; but tribal memory was satisfied to believe without argument that the old unobtrusive stock was the embodiment of tribal history. The Keithleys had been out in the '15, but

not in the '45; to the same daring, in their followers, there succeeded the same discretion. They had fought in the Peninsula and in the Crimea without becoming a military family; they had sat in parliament without becoming politicians; an unwanted younger son had strayed into the navy under Nelson, another had governed a colony, and in hall and gallery the representatives of thirteen generations smirked or glowered from the high walls on the latest heir to their blood. If the Keithleys had ever defined their purpose, it would have been to stand ready and to lend a hand whenever such men were needed in field or senate. As soon as it was known how the Stanleys were acting in Lancashire, the Percys in Northumberland, themselves in Inverness-shire, others could follow without misgiving.

It was in personal prestige alone that Invercaldy could rank with Knowsley or Alnwick, Chatsworth or Welbeck. The Keithleys had never sought high office or dignities; they were saved from poverty by the estates of the heiresses they married; and the precarious tenuity of their line preserved them from contracting wide alliances. Invercaldy descended from father to son; there was always a life to spare when war demanded it; but instinct seemed to tell succeeding generations that one heir could be trusted to carry on the inheritance, while more than one would dissipate it. When, as in 1914, father and son were both exposed to fire, the fate of the house might seem to hang by a thread; but in 1918, when both came back scarred but alive, tribal memory recalled that one Keithley had always been left at the end of every war.

With the armistice, Sir William threw up his command and retired to his library and garden. Though he was still at the service of his country, it was time

for Jack to take over the cares of empire. It was also time for Jack, who was nearly thirty, to look about him for a wife and to weld one more link into the endless chain. Hitherto he had been too busy, in India, in France and at the Staff College; since he came down from Cambridge, he had not spent a month on end at Invercaldy; and the Keithleys only saw him when they paid their annual visit to Mrs. Ferguson in Hans Place and when Jack brought up a party of friends in August or at Christmas.

"D'you know, I've not been here since 1914?" Bertie Millbank reckoned with surprise, as he walked up and down the platform at Euston with Frank Wharton and Reggie Bagshot.

"I shouldn't spring the war too abruptly on the Keithleys," Reggie advised. "It'll take them some time to realize there's been one."

From occasionally impatient confidences, Bertie judged that the Keithleys' son was not only aware that a war had taken place but was anxious to establish his claim to a holiday after it. At every meeting in the last month, Jack had indicated that he was tired of the army, tired of the Staff College and, most of all, tired of Camberley.

"Nothing ever changes at Invercaldy," murmured Wharton, as he counted—with the patent anxiety of a middle-aged bachelor—the voluminous luggage without which a self-indulgent man could not travel in comfort. "That's the great charm of the place. Lady K. never gets any older." . . .

"Nobody ever has a new idea," interrupted Reggie, with a foreboding of good behaviour sustained beyond human endurance. "I've always hoped that Jack would break out unexpectedly, but he *doesn't*. . .

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Amazing fellow! I ran into him after the last day of Goodwood, so I suggested we should make a night of it. You know, he was *really* like a girl who says 'Yes, if I may bring my mother with me.' I adore Lady K., but I defy any one to make a night of it with her. You'd have thought that the war . . . Oh, my prophetic soul, my general!"

He stiffened perceptibly as he caught sight of Jack advancing by the side of General Pierrepont. Greater age or lighter conscience enabled Bertie to face the encounter without embarrassment, though the general's unheralded inclusion in a young men's party made him wonder whether a council of war was to be held on Jack's reiterated determination to leave the army. The Keithleys expected their son to step back into the frame which he had occupied in 1914; because he seemed unchanged to outward appearance, they forgot that he might be bringing to Invercaldy a spirit of criticism, independence, perhaps even of revolt.

As ever the spectator of life, Bertie looked for signs of inward change in his friend's ingenuous face, only to find the eagerness of a boy released from school.

"Jove, it's good to be meeting again like this!" Jack cried, as they strode up and down the platform, arm-in-arm, till the silver-badged guard should wave them to their places.

"Euston's full of happy memories, though I always think it's the snob among railway stations," Bertie mused. "Cannon Street and London Bridge are the humble drudges of the City; so is Fenchurch Street, unless you're bound for Tilbury and the gorgeous east; so is Liverpool Street, unless you're shooting in Norfolk or taking a boat-train to Harwich. Waterloo is a rich *parvenu*, St. Pancras an elderly gentleman—

probably a duke—whose land has been rather built over by factories; Paddington is a country gentleman, King's Cross a captain of industry with very decent neighbours if you persevere. But Euston! One forgets Birmingham, Crewe. . . . Euston's the fellow who can't quite make out who the people are who travel third; Euston wears a fur-coat and smokes a big cigar on his way to the National, he's always slipping over to Ireland for the Horse Show or Punchestown when he's not going to stay at Eaton for Chester Races; he always wants to teach the working-classes a sharp lesson . . . and he trips over his gun-cases quite a bit."

"Waterloo's the place you come to when you break away from that filthy Staff College," Jack laughed.

"Have they been working you too hard?"

"I don't mind the work, but you're so frightfully out of things. I want to . . . see a bit of life." Jack turned his head guardedly to make sure that he was not overheard by General Pierrepont. "That's why old Stick-in-the-Mud has been invited. I've told the gov'nor I'll stay on in the army if I'm offered something decent at the War Office, but I don't see myself taking a job abroad. You know what the gov'nor's like, Bertie! 'My dear boy, you must go wherever you're sent.' It's all very well, but I want to . . . see my friends. . . . You don't know of any decent quarters in London, do you?" he demanded abruptly.

The eagerness of the holiday mood was drowned in discontent, though Bertie was not convinced that the brave insurrectionary spirit of London would survive transplanting to Invercaldy.

"Leslie Cornwallis told me he was giving up his flat in Piccadilly," he answered.

"To marry Beatrice Anker? Rather him than me!"

"It's not announced yet. . . . Is the general coming to decide your fate?"

"No! I've decided that myself. He'll weigh in with advice. . . . I'm not very popular at home just now, Bertie. My mother can't understand why I want quarters of my own when I can always get a bed at Aunt Hilda's; and the guv'nor thinks I've lost all sense of public duty. . . . The fact is, I'm frightfully bored, frightfully restless." . . .

"I was trying to classify you just before you arrived," Bertie laughed. "Among my war-types."

A transient frown hinted that Jack had no wish to see his individual state of soul cheapened by classification.

"Don't *you* ever feel you want an adventure?" he asked.

"Regularly! Every spring! This year I went so far as to fall seriously in love . . ."

"Oh, name! Name!"

"No, I shan't tell you that. You'd better do the same, Jack."

"But I can't fall in love with her if I don't know her name!"

"I should be furious if you did. You're slightly younger, far better-off, the heir to a baronetcy, what people call 'pleasing rather than handsome.' . . . I should hate to be cut out by you, Jack."

"I should hate to cut you out, old man, though you're far too detached ever to lose your head about any woman. But, if you don't tell me her name, I might cut you out in ignorance."

"I'm quite sure you don't know her; and, if you did, you'd disapprove of her so profoundly . . ."

A peremptory blast on the guard's whistle urged

them into the train before Bertie could complete his sentence; and, once on board, there was no chance of analyzing Jack's mood: with Reggie Bagshot seeking, in alternate spasms, to mellow the general with unexpected old brandy and to outrage Wharton with gross personalities, the energies of the onlookers were concentrated on maintaining peace. When the supper-party dispersed, Jack did indeed accompany Bertie to his sleeping compartment for the length of an unfinished pipe; but he attempted no greater confidence than the repeated, rueful fear that he was unpopular at home. It was only when Jack returned at daybreak that Bertie began to suspect a serious disturbance of mind.

Holding himself erect with one hand, shaving gingerly with the other and glancing from time to time through the clean light of early morning at scenery fraught with the memories of twenty years, he recalled the day when Sir William presented him with half a sovereign and asked him to look after Jack during his first term at a preparatory school; later, there was a first half to be faced at Eton; later still, a novitiate at King's and in the army. With four years' start in age, Bertie found himself the constant buffer between an only son and his too anxious parents. Hitherto, however, Jack had always come unhesitatingly for advice.

"It's the sign of a bad conscience when you can't sleep in the morning," Bertie began at large.

"Do I look as if I had a bad conscience?" Jack laughed.

A clear grey eye and fresh colour testified to health of body; the admission that he had slumbered without turning argued peace of mind; and on the Cale-

donian Railway, as in the mud of Passchendaele, Jack gave the impression of having emerged from a Turkish bath by way of a tailor's shop.

"I can't say you do. But, when you're my age, you'll know better than to smoke strong tobacco on an empty stomach."

"If you took as much exercise as I do, you could take liberties with your constitution."

"You certainly look . . . *disgustingly* fit."

"I certainly feel it. . . . Why don't they buck these trains up a bit?"

"You should refer that question to the directors. . . . How long are we expected to stay, Jack?"

"As long as you like. . . . It's just possible I may have to go back almost at once."

"To Camberley?"

"No."

As Jack stared, whistling, out of window for his first glimpse of the purple Invercaldy hills, Bertie finished his dressing without venturing on questions that, between such friends, must remain premature until they became superfluous. Like every one else in his long catalogue of war-types, Jack was admittedly restless; he was also patently preoccupied; but, even without previous knowledge of his character, one glance at his steady eyes and untroubled forehead was enough to shew that he had nothing on his conscience. If he had not twice faltered on the brink of a confidence, even his preoccupation would have been unsuspected.

"You're not serious in saying you've a row on with your people?" Bertie asked.

"Oh, 'row' is too strong a word," Jack answered. "Besides, that's all over."

With one explanation eliminated, Bertie tried and

discarded the hypothesis of money trouble, a private quarrel and a public scandal. None fitted a man who was without extravagances, enemies or vices; and, as they ran along Invercaldy Saddle to the point where the lake first appeared in a frame of virgin forest, he wondered whether his companion's growing impatience was connected with the Keithleys' avowed wish to see the next mistress of Invercaldy House installed before they died. Though Sir William talked readily enough of the days when Jack should bring his bride home, Jack must know better than any one the difficulty of satisfying his parents. Conceivably he felt no desire to marry yet; certainly he was not helped far along the road by two celibate shoots each year in Scotland and three or four crowded dances at his aunt's house in London.

"What does the party consist of?" Bertie enquired, as he finished his dressing.

"Just my people and ourselves."

"No womenkind? Good!"

"Unless you count Isabel. I always look on her as one of the family. . . . We're running in. I'll see if the others are ready."

Five minutes later, they struggled out of the station through an informal guard of honour. As in the days when Jack went to and from school, a gaunt, unaging gillie was waiting on the platform with a tangle of hysterical dogs; a deliberate station-master kept the train standing while he offered a slow-spoken welcome; and, at five house-doors out of six in the four-mile drive from the town, women with children and men with dogs relaxed their impassivity to utter a grave greeting.

"It *hasn't* changed . . . in the very least," Jack murmured in surprise.

"You must be frightfully respectable if you're going to live up to this kind of thing," grumbled Bag-shot.

"That comes naturally to some people," said Wharton in belated revenge for past indignities.

"It would brighten the life of the neighbourhood if our bonnie young chieftain got mixed up in a really murky scandal. It would brighten *his* life, too. Jack, old man, can't you do something to have yourself denounced from the pulpit? John Knox and all that sort of thing?"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't dare," Jack answered, as the car slowed round a hair-pin bend and he looked down on the flat roof and foreshortened terraces of Invercaldy.

Though he smiled, this atmosphere of immemorial tradition was not a matter for jesting. In London he could remember that he was living in the twentieth century; persons and events conspired to prove that he had an individuality of his own. Once over the border, he found his will becoming merged in an undefined general purpose; and, if his consequence was based on association with a famous house, his personal liberty ended when he entered its walls.

"Some one's waving," said Bertie.

"It's my father," Jack answered, smiling at the old ritual. "And here comes my mother. Jove, it's good to be back here!"

A moment later the four guests were being led through the house to a loaded breakfast-table on the terrace. Jack followed with his mother; and, as they

took their places, Isabel Mordaunt appeared from the garden with a basket of roses.

"It takes *me* some time to realize there's been a war," Bertie murmured to Bagshot, though the same party had risen from the same table in the first days of August five years before and driven soberly to the depot of the Lowland Light Infantry.

As in those days, Lady Keithley was bending hospitably over chair after chair; more the mother than the hostess, wholesome, sane, humorous, with twinkling eyes and weather-beaten skin, grey hair of which she did not think to be ashamed and a comfortable bulk that defied cold and fatigue. In her shadow, a part of her shadow, Sir William drifted with a whimsical smile, trying—in compliment to so many soldiers—to sink the scholar in the colonel and seeking relief in copious multilingual quotation. A stage type he always seemed to Bertie: courteous, enigmatic and ineffectual till roused by an attack on his raw sense of propriety. "If he had to draw up ten commandments," Jack once complained in a moment of undutiful illumination, "there would again be nine 'do not's' to one 'do.'"

Remote from both in character and position, Isabel Mordaunt stood in command of the table, firm in the poise of her vigorous young body, arresting in the contrast of pale face and auburn hair, cool and unapproachable in the stiff lines of her white dress. None of the visitors could remember accurately when she first arrived on the familiar scene. As a child, she had been rescued from a discordant home and brought up in the place of that daughter for whom Lady Keithley yearned. Imbued with the uncompromising puritanism of Invercaldy, she found difficulty in returning

to either of her parents for more than a few weeks in the year; and, as her adoptive mother depended on her help in entertaining every house-party, her headquarters were always in Scotland when she was not staying with one or other of her widely-scattered relations. Six years before, she had poured out coffee while the cars stood loaded for war; six years later, when the cyclone had spent itself, she was at her accustomed post.

"As Rabelais says, '*Le déjeuner fait bonne mémoire,*'" Sir William murmured, as he sauntered round the table, swinging a toast-rack from one finger, like a censer.

"There are points about a hot bath," suggested Jack.

"'*Balnea, vina, Venus,*'" quoted his father with a shake of the head, "*'corrumpunt corpora nostra; Sed vitam faciunt balnea, vina, Venus.'*"

The lines tumbled out so quickly that only Jack, from patient practice, recognized them; but it was a rule of the house to leave all Sir William's quotations uncapped, unchallenged and, for the most part, uncomprehended.

"When you've had all you want, I'm going to send you *all* to your rooms. Those who like to go to bed may do so; I'll have you called at one o'clock." . . .

For the fiftieth time Bertie listened delightedly to an announcement that was always made with the air of a brilliant improvisation. Lady Keithley was inexorably convinced that no one but her husband, her son and herself had enough food, rest, warmth, exercise or fresh air.

"You do *pamper* them, Lady K.," laughed Isabel Mordaunt; and even her slightly scornful tone was

beautifully keyed to the instrument which she always played in this familiar orchestra.

No one, to Bertie's regard, was a day older, a line changed. After five years in France and on the Rhine, the men were surrendering as easily to the peace, the sanity, the health of Invercaldy as in the last July days before the war. It was fancy, no doubt, but Frank Wharton seemed less flabby and Reggie less dissipated. Jack had lost his restlessness and forgotten the need for an adventure in his life; and the Keithleys looked as if no misunderstanding could ever take place between their adored son and themselves.

"It *doesn't* seem like six years," Bertie murmured.

"It's six minutes . . . or six *hundred* years," answered Isabel.

"I should like to think we none of us looked more than six minutes older . . ." Bertie began.

Then he shied from an intended compliment that masked unexpected dangers. Isabel must now be seven-and-twenty . . . at least; she had not married in these six years. Another six years of the thwarted passion and starved maternity that led her to decorate Jack's room with these pink roses which he never noticed would make her a cantankerous old maid; already her manner was calculated to convince the best-meaning men of their unworthiness.

Bertie allowed his thoughts to linger for a moment on the child, alternately wistful and radiant, who had possessed his mind for so many months. If he married Joan, *when* he married Joan, he could only bring her to Invercaldy so long as she turned her back on half her life and all her character. Heavens! If he told Lady K. or Isabel that a girl, in time of great unhappiness, had come to his bachelor rooms and slept on

the sofa till midnight! She might win forgiveness from the charming Keithley trait of refusing to believe ill of a friend; he could no more do wrong than Jack, but they would wonder instantly what other bachelor rooms this shameless girl had visited. There was no change! The Keithleys—and Isabel with them—had forgotten nothing and learned nothing. Bertie felt convinced, as always, that they were wrong and that the world would be a better place when others adopted their wrong standards.

“‘*Somne, quies rerum,*’” Sir William declaimed, “‘*placidissime, somne, Deorum, Pax animi.*’ You know where that comes from, Jack? It’s time we sent these weary travellers to their beds, my dear.”

“Well, if you’ll shew Frank and Reggie their rooms, Jack can look after the general. I’ll take charge of Bertie. . . . William and I spent a week with Hilda Ferguson at the beginning of the month,” Lady Keithley confided, as they went upstairs. “Have you seen much of Jack this summer? We thought then he was . . . not quite himself.”

Looking down to the terrace, Bertie saw Jack and his father drawing their chairs nearer to the general’s.

“I think he’s pretty well fed-up with Camberley,” he answered.

“Well . . . we’ll hope they send him to the War Office. Or I don’t think we should mind his leaving the army altogether, provided he had *something* to do. You know he’s taking rooms in London?”

“So he told me. It’s . . . very natural. He’s earned a holiday, Lady K.”

“Oh, he has! And I’m quite sure he can look after himself. I shouldn’t like to think he had anything on his mind, though; and, when we saw him in London, he

was so curiously . . . *irritable*. Which isn't like Jack. We seemed to get on his nerves so much that I doubted at one time whether he would come here at all."

"I can assure you he's been champing the bit ever since I saw him at Euston. I don't think you've any need to be . . . anxious, Lady K."

"No. . . . But I *am*. Keep an eye on him, Bertie; and let me know from time to time how things are. He'd tell you more than he'd tell me."

Left to himself, Bertie changed into a dressing-gown and sat smoking by the window until his bath was ready. Lady Keithley's meaning was unambiguous. So far as the eye could reach, lake, woods and mountains would all one day be Jack's, with this three-hundred-year-old house and the revenue from a populous tract of land on the outskirts of North London. He was worth the while of most women; and the Keithleys were perhaps realizing for the first time that he could not always be guided by older friends or guarded by prim relations. Though they had given in over the rooms in London and were ready to give in over the army, they were sorely perplexed.

"If I were a girl, I'd marry him just to have Lady K. as a mother-in-law," he reflected; "though she'd be deuced hard to please. Nobody will ever be quite good enough for the ewe-lamb."

On the terrace underneath his window Isabel came in sight, swinging an empty basket and carrying a bundle of London papers. As a war-type Bertie put her in the vast category of girls whom the war had driven from London ball-rooms and country houses into hospitals, canteens and offices. At seven-and-twenty she had lost the partners of six years before, probably she

had also lost the taste for a life of pleasure; it was time to marry if she aspired to anything more than arranging the flowers and answering the letters of women like Lady Keithley, but the chance of marrying was never worse than at a time when half her friends had been killed and the other half were repairing their wrecked fortunes.

"She'd be the perfect wife for Jack. And he's the one man she wouldn't feel obliged to trample under foot," Bertie mused, with recollections of the day when he followed in the wake of the first tanks and Reggie Bagshot shouted hysterically: "*Another society war-worker: Miss Isabel Mordaunt flattening out friend and foe indiscriminately.*"

When the party assembled in the hall before luncheon, Lady Keithley murmured that their conversation must not be repeated to Jack.

"But you *will* let us know if you think he's worried about anything," she begged. "Perhaps, as you say, it's only that he's tired of the Staff College." . . .

Bertie looked to the corner where Isabel was arguing with Jack. The charge of irritability was being substantiated before his eyes; and he strolled across the hall in the hopes of restoring peace.

"I want you, too," Isabel announced, as he joined them. "I've promised my cousin, Beatrice Anker, to bring you both to a party at Marston Park."

Of all undertakings given in his name, Bertie was least inclined to honour the one that involved accepting hospitality from a woman who employed reconciliations as a starting-point for new quarrels. Three years earlier, he and his brother-officers had been commanded to choose between Curtis Anker and his ill-used wife; without hesitation they had snatched at the

opportunity of escaping the lashes of Beatrice's tongue. If she now wanted to bring them back into her life, it was to strengthen her own position or to administer belated punishment.

"Is she really marrying Leslie Cornwallis?" Bertie enquired suspiciously.

"I don't know. She doesn't either. And it doesn't matter. She felt it very much that you all sided with Curtis against her when he was behaving so abominably, but now that's all over and done with . . ."

Bertie reflected that his welcome at Marston Park would not be the more cordial for Beatrice's knowing that he had befriended the last of her rivals.

"I'll come if Jack comes," he promised.

"But he won't say!"

Though the words were spoken without sharpness, Bertie observed Jack's face clouding.

"Because I don't know what I shall be doing when I leave here," Jack answered with ominous distinctness.

"When d'you go back to Camberley?" asked Isabel.

"I don't know."

"When do you leave here?"

"I don't know."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders and pretended not to notice the now undisguised asperity of his tone.

"You *have* become mysterious all of a sudden," she murmured, as she turned to include Reggie in the ill-starred invitation.

"I believe the old man's leading a double life," was the helpful answer, delivered with one eye on Lady Keithley. "What's all this? Beatrice giving a party . . . ?"

CHAPTER TWO

THE DAWN OF ADVENTURE

"What may the woman labour to confess?
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch,
'Tis something to be told, or hidden:—which? . . .

She will not speak. I will not ask. We are
League-sundered by the silent gulf between." . . .
—GEORGE MEREDITH: *Modern Love*.

*"Here's a health to all those that we love,
Here's a health to all those that love us,
Here's a health to all those that love them that love those
That love them that love those that love us."*

JACK! General! Bertie! All of you!"
As he rose and bowed to his father, Jack was chiefly concerned to note that luncheon was at an end. When Lady Keithley and Isabel withdrew, he swallowed his coffee and asked to be excused on the plea of having letters to write.

"Another five minutes of that!" he whispered to the flushed reflection in the mirror outside the dining-room door. There were deep ruts in his forehead and lines from his mouth; his whole face felt unshapely, and he disliked the colour of his hair. "I'm in a vile temper," he had to admit; "and, till that's cured, everything *will* seem wrong."

Hurrying upstairs and through his bedroom, he locked himself in the old day-nursery which for twenty years had been his sanctuary. Note-paper lay invitingly on the table; and he drew in a chair as though the sight

of it had given him his inspiration. After addressing two envelopes, he filled a pipe and walked for half an hour backwards and forwards between the fireplace and the window. At the end he sat down; and, as he dipped his pen in the ink, he could feel his cheeks warming.

"Dear Aunt Hilda . . ." He hesitated and caught himself looking guiltily round the empty room to the door which he had himself locked. *"Will you be kind enough to address the enclosed and send it on? When I met Miss Prendergast at your house, I promised to give her certain information; but, like a fool, I forgot to get her address. Forgive me for troubling you!"*

"Ever yours,

"Jack Keithley."

Breathing heavily, he took a second sheet of paper and sat with his pen poised over it till he could cease wondering what his aunt would make of his request.

"My dear Miss Prendergast," he began at length; and, though he smiled unreasoningly at what he wrote, the words fell irregularly on the paper in a nervous stammer; *"I grieve to say that I must charge you with a serious breach of faith. Did you or did you not promise to lunch with me the next time I could get away from Camberley? You wouldn't tell me your address, because you were picnicking at some club; but you swore you'd let me know as soon as you got into your new quarters. Well, I waited and waited; not a word! And now I've come up here to spend a few days with my people and I still don't know how to find you. Being a man of resource, I am sending*

this to my aunt, Mrs. Ferguson, in the hope that she will forward it.

"When am I going to see you? I don't quite know how soon I shall be coming south; but it would be delightful if you sent me a letter (or a telegram, if you're in a damn-the-expense mood) to say you will lunch with me. Claridge's. One-thirty. Name the day.

"I can't tell you how much I enjoyed that party of Aunt Hilda's! I'd been doing my duty like a perfect gentleman and was feeling just a little bit bored. Suddenly I saw you, surrounded nineteen-deep. 'Who,' I said to Reggie Bagshot, going to work methodically, 'is that?' 'Joan Prendergast,' he answered. 'I must be introduced to Miss Prendergast,' I said. 'It's a mistake to begin by giving her a "miss,"' said Reggie, which I thought was rather quick of him.

"When I let you go that night, it was on condition that we were to meet again at once. And that was nearly a month ago. And I've been waiting and wondering and wondering and waiting. I hunted for you in the Red Book and the telephone directory." . . . Jack hesitated to say that he had tried daily to screw his courage to the point of asking Reggie Bagshot. Daily he had failed, but it was impossible to explain even to Joan why he wanted her to remain his great secret. . . . "And it was quite by chance that I've had this brain-wave of applying to Aunt Hilda.

"Don't you think, after all this trouble, it's your moral duty to send me a wire, naming your day? There's a night train from here, so I can be with you at very short notice. And I should love to see you again.

*"Very sincerely yours,
"Jack Keithley."*

As the letter slid into its envelope, Jack roused with regret from the delicious communing of a broken dream. By closing his eyes, he could indeed charm back for a moment the vision of a fragile, dark-haired figure in a black frock; her hazel eyes melted as he whispered her name; and, by shutting his ears to every other sound, he could hear her involuntarily murmuring:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive." . . . And the answer? For the life of him he could not say where it occurred; but, whenever the question of age came to be discussed, his father always sighed with mock-melancholy and repeated:

"But to be young was very heaven."

And the words had leapt spontaneously to his lips, because this strange child, standing slender and fragrant as a nodding lily, explained the perfection of youth to him as he had never understood it before.

A tinkle of china from the terrace beneath his open windows recalled Jack's mind from the alternate ecstasy and bewilderment of the last month. As he sealed the letter, he felt that he had taken a step forward, which carried him beyond the associations and allegiances in which he had been brought up. This was an adventure, perhaps the adventure of his life—he would know more of that when Joan answered his letter; it was something which he could not share with any one, though the sense that he was once more in communion with Joan made him feel at peace with Invercaldy. Hurrying downstairs, he flushed Bertie Millbank from the smoking-room and carried him off for a walk round the gardens. At tea he made amends for his earlier petulance; and, after tea, he allowed Isabel to claim him for the tour of inspection which they had executed

on their first day together ever since he went to his preparatory school.

"Five o'clock from Invercaldy, eight o'clock to-morrow in London." . . .

A telegram sent off at nine or thereabouts should be delivered before noon; and, in helping his father to arrange their first day's shooting, Jack was careful to draw their course along the moor nearest to the house in such a way that they could lunch at home. No telegram had arrived when they returned; and he told himself convincingly that there was not the least reason why Joan should telegraph when a letter would reach him next morning. Of all the letters that came next day, however, none was from her; and Jack reminded himself that his own had to miss a post by being forwarded from Mrs. Ferguson's house:

"For all I know, Aunt Hilda's in Hampshire. Joan may be away, too. To-morrow; to-morrow evening; the day after. She may be at some place like Dinard." . . .

Though he reasoned himself into guarding against this new irritability that fell on him as the penalty of restlessness unsatisfied, Jack could not pretend to be interested in the life around him. He played his part adequately when he was hunted away to dine with pompous neighbours; he received them civilly enough when they came to shoot at Invercaldy. If Reggie formed a ring to bait Frank Wharton, he would take his turn till the sport grew tiresome; at a pinch he would talk high strategy with General Pierrepont or flounder in obscurantist politics with his father. It was idle to chafe at this aimless routine of eating and shooting; he could only exchange it for the routine of eating and working at Camberley, eating and cub-hunt-

ing with the Fergusons in Hampshire, eating and sitting through dull plays in London. That had all been well enough before he became so restless. . . .

On the fifth day, when hope was dying, the butler entered the dining-room with an orange envelope. As Jack lifted it from the salver, every one else in the room faded into the mist of a dream.

"Letter only received to-day returning London to-morrow and delighted lunch then if convenient Joan."

After one meeting, it was natural, then, for her to sign herself "Joan." He breathed deeply, frowning in duplicity at the telegram till he could unconcernedly ask Frank Wharton for a pencil:

"Ah! . . . I'm afraid I shall have to go up to London to-night. . . . Trender, will you see if you can get me a sleeper?"

The dream-figures on either side of him began to speak and grimace in a dream-confusion. Sir William looked displeased, Lady Keithley was hurt. Reggie tried to be funny; Frank Wharton proffered sympathy that convinced no one who expected to see him, with a clear field, making every possible inch of progress in his plodding race with Isabel.

For better or worse, there was no one to whom Jack could explain the significance of this wonderful telegram. At present, he decided, it was for better. The excitement of this adventure with Joan was that he was playing a lone hand: if Hilda Ferguson had introduced him, she would have spoilt everything; and Joan would have become as uninteresting as any other of the girls whom he was invited to meet. But he had discovered her for himself! They had decided for

themselves that they wanted to meet again; and after this second meeting would come a third, a fourth. . . .

"And when shall we see you again?" Lady Keithley was asking.

"I'll let you know when I get to London," Jack answered evasively.

A wonderful day it would be when his mother could be admitted to his great discovery! But, while he was himself still discovering Joan, he knew that the obstruction of his parents would be only less formidable than their assistance. If they invited Joan to Invercaldy! He would as soon invite them to the luncheon at Claridge's next day!

"You won't forget about our week-end with Beatrice, will you?" murmured Isabel.

For a moment Jack could not remember who Beatrice was; then he recollected a reluctant, vague promise to accompany Bertie and Reggie to a reconciliation-party at Marston with a woman who meant less to him than the dust on his boots:

"I'll tell you about that when I see how I'm fixed."

After that, he was left in peace until he drove to the station. Bertie insisted on seeing him off; but this involved no more than twenty minutes' interruption to his dreaming. Until he fell asleep, Jack rehearsed the dialogue for the scene in which he revealed his great discovery: "*You remember, mother, when I went back to London quite suddenly? I'd had a telegram; it was from Joan.*" . . . Always thinking of her as Joan, he broke off to wonder how he could first, in speaking to her, use this name which she had offered him as a present. Probably he would slip into it by accident . . . and feel an awful fool; but Joan would let him down lightly because she was too gentle to do anything else.

If she had any conception how shy he felt about their meeting next day. . . . Living with men all his life, in the regiment, at Camberley, gave him no chance of picking up technique. . . .

On reaching Euston, Jack drove to his club for a bath and breakfast. When he had ordered a table for luncheon, he walked into Piccadilly and kept his mind occupied by making enquiries about the lease of Leslie Cornwallis' chambers. Still with two hours in hand, he sauntered into Long Acre and compared the prices of small cars, then hurried away in terror that he would be late and arrived at Claridge's half an hour before Joan was due. . . .

If she missed her train, if she lost heart at the last moment . . .

As she walked into the lounge, looking from side to side, Jack sprang up and caught her hand as though he feared some one else would steal her. She was prettier than he remembered, prettier than he had thought possible. By daylight her eyes were dark pools of laughter. In the August heat and dust, she alone remained sweet and cool, like a flower . . . a lily, with that soft throat and slender neck. . . .

"At last!"

"But I'm not late, am I?"

Jack found that he had forgotten the eager throb in her voice:

"No, but I thought you were never coming."

"It was sweet of you to invite me."

"It was sweet of you to come. You're . . . looking awfully well."

Stepping back a pace, she posed laughingly for his devouring admiration:

"I've put on a new dress in your honour."

"I love it! . . . Shall we go in?"

"Yes, but you'll scandalize the waiters if we go hand in hand!"

Jack released her fingers as though they were burning him:

"I'm so sorry! I really didn't notice. . . . Will you have a cocktail first?"

"I don't think so, thanks. . . . What have you been doing since last we met?"

"Absolutely nothing! Have you been able to think of any excuse for not telling me your address, *as you promised?*"

Joan laughed as she walked by his side to a table in one of the windows. If she had felt any nervousness, she not only concealed it but dispelled the shyness that had been written in Jack's face as he alternately stammered and gabbled.

"I came the moment you invited me," she protested, as she drew off her gloves. "All the way from Wiltshire. You know Alec Henson? Such a lovely place his mother has!"

Though he thought he remembered everything about her, Jack had wholly forgotten how soft and slender her hands were.

"But look how long you made me wait! . . . D'you like *hors d'œuvres?*"

"I adore them. Captain Keithley . . ."

Jack turned away and beckoned to the wine-waiter:

"In my baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ, a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven, my godfathers and godmothers gave me the name of Jack."

"I don't believe it for a moment!" Joan answered, as she explored a dish of olives. "They sent for a

writing-table and said 'His name is John.' If I call you John, you'll have to call me Joanna."

"If I thought any one had dared to call you Joanna! . . . I've ordered moselle-cup; can you drink that?"

"I'll try. . . . Jack, I *am* enjoying your party!"

"You'd enjoy it even more if you had something to eat or drink."

"I don't know that I should." . . . As their eyes met, he saw that hers were perilously bright. "I nearly . . . cried when I got your letter!"

"Why did you make me wait so long?"

Joan hesitated while the waiter helped her to fish; then she turned to the window and watched the cars drawing up at the side-entrance.

"If I said I was . . . afraid?"

"Or that, if you didn't give me your address, I should have to find it out?"

The laughter faded from her eyes as though he had struck her.

"I didn't think . . . you could be unkind . . . if you *tried!*" she faltered.

"But, my dear, I didn't *mean* to be unkind!" Jack cried in consternation. "Didn't I tell you I'd been searching the directories . . .?"

"I'm sorry! It sounded rather as if you thought I was saying: 'If he wants to see me, he must come and find me.' . . . It wasn't that a bit, Jack. You'll find me in the book now—an attic in Old Burlington Street; and I wrote the address out for you when I got home that night."

"You didn't post it."

"I was . . . frightened. . . . I can't take responsibility. If I'd said to you that night: 'Do come and have tea with me'; if you'd come, if you'd been sorry

afterwards because I bored you, well, it would have been my fault."

"So it's my blood on my own head if I want to be friends with you?"

"I'm an . . . unsatisfactory friend."

"I'll take the risk of that. After all, it's a risk that a good many other people seem to have taken."

"I haven't so very many friends."

"I waited an hour in the queue before I could get near you at Aunt Hilda's."

"But those weren't my friends! I *have* had friends . . . two, three . . . who've made me think men were the most wonderful things God ever created. If you and I became friends . . ."

"Mayn't we?"

Turning suddenly from the window, Joan laid her hand on Jack's wrist:

"I should only disappoint you! As long as we're laughing and talking nonsense, it's all right, but that's not *friendship*. I'm terribly . . . superficial. I had rather a . . . bad war. Everything I cared for . . . It's left me a bit bruised, so that I'm honestly surprised when people are nice to me. You must *give* something if you're going to be friends; and I've nothing to give. . . . Now don't let's ever talk about me again. You're on leave? But you haven't finished your course at the Staff College? When do you go back?"

"At the end of the month. I suppose you're frightfully booked up? If not, can't we do some theatres and things together?"

"I should love it!"

"To-night?"

"You won't want to see me twice in one day."

"I'm the best judge of that. To-night . . . We'll send for a paper and see what's on. Have you any feeling about dining with me alone?"

"I don't mind if *you* don't."

"And your people? I don't even know if you have any people. I'm the proud possessor of one father and one mother: darlings both."

"I can beat that! One father, one mother, three sisters complete with husbands . . ."

"Any brothers?"

"Two. I had a third, but he was killed in the war."

"I'm sorry. . . . Where would you like to dine, Joan?"

"Are you *sure* you want me again?"

For answer, Jack produced an engagement-book and pencil.

"You say you won't take responsibility," he murmured. "I'll take it for you. I'm in treaty for a car, and we might go off into the country one day. The New Forest or the Sussex Downs. . . . I haven't had a *real* holiday since the beginning of the war. . . . We might have such fun together! And we'll keep it an absolute secret." . . .

Stretching out her hand, Joan closed the book and gave it back to him.

"I couldn't bear you to be disappointed," she whispered.

"I shall be terribly disappointed if you don't come."

"But I'm looking ahead! I've loved this party, Jack, but you may spoil everything if you try to repeat it."

Temporarily at a loss for an answer, Jack motioned to the waiter for his bill. As he signed it, Joan began

to draw on her gloves; and, when he looked up again, her head was bent until her face was hidden.

"You'll come to-night?" he pleaded. "Or would you rather not? I should hate you to do anything you didn't want to, Joan."

"Oh, I *want* to! . . . I don't know how to explain, but I'm so afraid we may be making a mistake. You've been very sweet to me; I'll come to-night, to-morrow, whenever you ask me; but . . . I'm unsatisfactory . . . and I couldn't bear you to regret what you've done for me."

"I'm not conscious of having done anything so far."

"No, my dear, I know you're not!" Joan laughed unsteadily.

CHAPTER THREE

FOUR-LEAF CLOVERS

"Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead."

—A. C. SWINBURNE: *A Forsaken Garden.*

THE extraordinary thing is that this is still our first day," Jack reminded himself, as he drove into Old Burlington Street and waited for Joan. He seemed to have known her all his life and yet to be discovering a new fascination in every change of her voice and eyes. When she came to the door, she too accepted him as though they had always been friends. "It looked a bit showery," he explained, with a glance at a cloudless sky. "And I didn't know if it was easy for you to get taxis here."

If he was saving her a fare, the tiny act of thoughtfulness was but the first of many charming small attentions. The best table at the Excelsior had been reserved for them; the food and wine had been ordered by a connoisseur; and a spray of lilies lay beside her plate.

"Did you guess . . . ?" Joan began, then checked herself.

"You were wearing lilies at Aunt Hilda's party."

"They were in season then. Now you've been very extravagant."

"Since I left you this afternoon, I've been having a perfect rake's progress," Jack answered. "A car, a luncheon basket, six new dress ties. . . . Don't you think it would be rather fun if we went motoring on Sunday?"

"It would be fun for me, but I'm so afraid of boring you."

"I'll toss you lightly into the nearest ditch when I'm tired of you."

"If you'll really promise to do that. . . . Since *I* left *you*, I've been working very hard." . . .

As though he already knew the general course of her daily life, she told him, without introduction, of two women whom she had been teaching to dance, of a third who wanted her advice in furnishing a country cottage, of a fourth who was inviting her to come as a companion to Cairo for the winter.

"But, if you go to Egypt, I shall have no one to play with," Jack pointed out.

"I can't afford to refuse. And it'll be time then for *you* to do some work. I always understood from Mrs. Ferguson that you were terribly serious and conscientious."

"One must have a holiday sometimes. In August . . ."

"London's extraordinarily full for August," Joan murmured as she looked round the neighbouring tables, already more than half of them occupied, even at seven.

Fay Allport, whom she had not seen since the disastrous night of the Warriors' Ball, stalked by in advance of a fussy and voluble Frenchman, staring

scornfully from side to side but recognizing no one. A grey-faced barrister bowed; and Joan was bowing in return before she saw that he was her own brother-in-law. Leslie Cornwallis threaded his way across the room to arrange an appointment with Jack and hurried back guiltily as an imperious blue figure with a vast green fan appeared in the doorway.

"I've said we'll meet him after the theatre," Jack announced. "They're going to the same show; but I don't want to run into Beatrice Anker or she'll badger me to go and stay with her. D'you know those quarters of his in Piccadilly? I want your opinion on them." . . .

As though they had always been friends, Jack assumed without question that Joan must be acquainted with Cornwallis; he assumed that she knew Mrs. Anker and he would have been amazed to find her fighting for breath as at her first distant view in Paris. After that, it required an effort, at the end of dinner, for her to remember that he did not know all her relations, a greater effort to introduce him to the Graysons. They took each other so much for granted and discussed their expedition for the coming Sunday as though they motored out of London together every week.

Standing by the revolving door till he should beckon her to a cab, lingering there between the light and the darkness, Joan had a strange feeling that her life was divided by Jack's coming as the familiar restaurant was divided from the mysterious street. Behind her, seen in a glance over the high collar of her cloak, the austere, handsome profile of her sister conjured up a picture of childhood at Burdon Court; the white cheeks and sunken eyes of Fay Allport, transfixing her with

the memories of her long waking nightmare, were reflected, like an apparition, in the mirror; and Leslie Cornwallis, bending confidentially over the table, conjured up yet another dream of a party where the laws of gravitation were suspended, where Reggie and Alec Henson, Mrs. Ferguson and Leslie swam backwards and forwards, up and down, . . . where Curtis stood stiffly to attention by her side, whispering "Play up." . . . Dream or no, she had waked and left an unreal world behind her. Reality? . . . Jack was real, as he pushed his way through the revolving door, calling that the taxi was there; real in the laughing eyes that contradicted the severe lines of his clear-cut young face; real in the merciless grip he gave to her arm as he helped her in; real as he laughed, like a healthy boy, at the age-old jests of the revue, till their neighbours laughed in sympathy.

"My scheme," he explained half-way through, "is to wait till Leslie's free. Then we can all go and have a drink in his rooms. Or, if you want to go to bed, I'll drop you and go on. I don't want to tire you, because I'm planning a long day for to-morrow."

The way he disposed of her was enchanting! Once before, in the black days, Bertie Millbank used to carry her off to lunch, take her shopping, bring her home, with the same tender protectiveness that men seemed always to shew if you were too helpless to know what you wanted. In the black days, Bertie had kept her alive; a little more, and he would have made her want to enjoy life as Jack was enjoying the revue. Had his own zest grown weak? Was it just that Jack was nearer to her in age, that they could laugh at each other's absurd jokes? In Bertie she always missed some kindling spark of vitality; and she had felt its

warmth that day as Jack sprang from his chair to greet her. Bertie, in the black days, had kissed her; and she was so dead in spirit to all men that she hardly noticed it. She could never with safety allow herself to be kissed by Jack. . . .

"What are you going to do to-morrow?" she asked.

"I've no idea! But we're going to have a long day together, all by ourselves. . . . Is this the end?"

Cornwallis met them in the hall, and they strolled back through the velvet night to Old Burlington Street. Constraint fell icily at the presence of a stranger: and Joan was glad to walk half a pace ahead of the others while they talked ponderously of "outside painting" and "landlord's repairs." At the street door they would have left her, but she begged them to come in; and, when at length she was alone, the little gay-coloured rooms were still warm from Jack's admiration.

"Till to-morrow! I'll come for you at ten. Good-night, Joan. It's been a wonderful day."

"Good-night! And thank you a thousand times!"

Half-past ten was striking before he appeared; and the apology for his lateness turned to a comprehensive apology that flushed his face and set his fingers fidgeting with the bibelots on her mantelpiece:

"It never occurred to me at the time. . . . It wouldn't have occurred to me now if old Leslie hadn't rung me up this morning and bitten my head off. I . . . oughtn't to have stayed talking to you after he'd gone. He says he *tried* to get me away, but I simply wouldn't see what he was driving at. . . . I'm . . . sorry, Joan. No harm's done, thank God, but I'd cut off both hands before I did anything . . ."

"To compromise me? It didn't occur to me either. I'm just as much to blame."

"Indeed you're not! I'm . . . responsible for you."

Though the vain cloud lifted quickly, Joan observed that the morning's reproof was reflected in Jack's dispositions for that day and succeeding days. When they lunched or dined in London, he chose a less conspicuous meeting-place than the Excelsior; at a play she found herself half-hidden behind the curtains of a box; but, for the most part, he carried her far away from London, to Maidenhead and Dorking, Arundel and Virginia Water. At the beginning there was a reluctant, embarrassed suggestion that he should be paraded for inspection by her family; it was thankfully withdrawn when she said:

"But we're not doing anything wrong. And it's nobody's business but ours."

"Oh, I agree! Somehow, though . . . I suppose I've been brought up in the grand old English belief that it's sinful ever really to enjoy yourself."

"Then what a sinner you make me feel for the last five days!"

"You *have* enjoyed yourself? Bless you! I've had delivery of the car; and I'm coming for you to-morrow at nine."

Five days? So long as it was only one or two, Jack was in no hurry for conventional introductions; but he realized that he might look foolish if Mrs. Grayson or one of the brothers said: "*Is it a fact that you've been going about with my sister for the last month or so? Don't you know the construction people put on that?*" . . . Lady Keithley would have a short way with any girl who behaved as he was encouraging

Joan to behave; Sir William would let him know, without mincing of words, what he thought of a man who imperilled a girl's good name. And yet they were doing nothing wrong!

As he walked home, Jack grappled with the paradox that, while these secret meetings were innocent, while even his parents must come to see that they were innocent, fully a half of their charm would evaporate when they were no longer secret. Did not the ever-new miracle of his happiness lie in this: that he had discovered Joan, that they had decided for themselves to be friends? The most censorious could not blame him for the first luncheon at Claridge's, the first dinner at the Excelsior, the first play; and, if each part of their relationship was innocent, the whole must be innocent. They had glided imperceptibly from one thing to another.

"Five days?"

Joan repeated in amazement the computation which her brain had registered automatically. Since that first luncheon together, she had lost count of time; she only recollected it now because Jack had talked so much of the car, she had told him a dozen times that she must buy herself a new motor veil. And here was Saturday evening, and no veil bought.

"It won't be *very* windy, will it?" she pleaded next day, as though she could trust him to control even the elements. "If so, I *must* tie something round my head."

"Everything is provided," he assured her, as he threw open the door of his resplendent new car. "If you will open that neat brown-paper parcel . . ."

From a bulky package inscribed with her name Joan

drew forth a veil and dust-coat, a cushion, a box of chocolates and a jade pendant.

"But, my dear! . . ." she gasped.

"They threw in the pendant because they had no change," Jack explained. "They're very decent people, I've dealt with them ever since yesterday morning."

"But, Jack, you *mustn't* do things like this!"

Now that it was too late, Jack realized that he had fallen from one depth to another. The inviolable law had been explained, once and for all time, ten years before, when he bet Isabel Mordaunt a hat and tried to make literal payment of a lost wager. Gloves, Lady Keithley expounded, were unexceptionable; a broken fan might be replaced by a new one, chocolates, flowers and books were permitted marks of admiration. In no circumstances, however, must a woman accept articles of apparel from any man but her husband or father; in no circumstances must a man offer jewellery to a girl until they were betrothed.

The inviolable law seemed to have been roughly handled; but, as he wavered between apology and argument, Jack reflected that this again was a thing, innocent in itself, for Joan and him alone to decide. Since Lady Keithley indoctrinated him with so much scruple, a long war had changed the conventional relationship between men and women; London permitted a fellowship at which Invercaldy would still look askance. There was a world of moral difference between a jade pendant and a pearl necklace; and, though his parents might be hard to convince, he could freely give Joan presents which he would not give to the girls whom he found supping with Reggie Bagshot.

"I'll do something else next time," he laughed. "Are you ready? Contact! They're off! I'm going

to shew you where the world's work is done at Camberley, and then we'll find some place where we can lunch to 'the lisp of leaves and the ripple of'—running water, I'd better say. I've got into the most awful habit of making misquotations on every inappropriate occasion. My father's responsible; and he does it in six or seven languages. You'll love him, Joanie." . . .

Though she seemed to have spent an earlier incarnation at Invercaldy, Joan never tired of Jack's devotion to his parents. They had given him everything that she had missed; but through him she was able to capture it. Through him she had recaptured her love of life. . . .

Silence fell upon them as they neared the New Forest. While Jack stopped to consult his map, Joan sighed gently in the fullness of her contentment.

"The colours!" she cried in ecstasy, as the car plunged into the woods.

"It is a day and a half!"

They left the main road and crept through winding rides to a tumbledown bridge. Abandoning the car, they followed the course of the stream to a tiny clearing walled and roofed by the interlaced branches of the neighbouring trees. Jack spread a rug on the grass and began to unpack the hamper, while Joan took off her hat and knelt down to lay the table. Both were shy, though Jack kept up a stream of comments as he untied one little parcel after another; and, as they ate, they could only discuss the food.

"I got them to make me up a meal at the club," he explained. "I shall be thankful when I have quarters of my own in London."

"Your people spend all their time in Scotland?"

"Pretty well. You must come and stay with us, Joan. If I arrange a little party at Christmas . . ."

"I shall be in Cairo, I'm afraid."

"I *wish* you weren't going away," he grumbled.

"My dear, don't spoil the present by thinking of the future! Look round! Anywhere! Could you find anything more perfect than this?"

The chequered sunlight was stealing through the russet and golden leaves on to the brown water of the stream, thence to fly off in silver spray. As she turned to watch it, Jack sat upright, in sudden excitement, as though he were seeing her for the first time in her natural setting.

"What on earth's the word?" he exclaimed. "Hama-dryad! That's it!"

"Where?"

"Here, of course. Joan, you *are* the most beautiful human being I've ever seen! You're so slender, you move so gracefully! I adore your wavy hair with the breeze just ruffling it . . ."

"Jack!"

"I've made you blush! Oh, I wish to heaven I'd done that before! I wanted just a touch more colour! And it's made your eyes a thousand times brighter!"

"But what have I done to deserve this?"

"I'd seen it all before, but I never realized. . . . Joan dear, will you stand up and shew me your frock?"

Smiling down on him as though she were humouring a child, she circled slowly in front of him and then knelt by his side.

"I made it myself," she murmured with the confiding gravity of a child. "It's nothing very wonderful." . . .

"I love it."

"I wanted you to. It's copied from one of the models in Fragonard's. I went in and watched and watched till I knew it by heart. I hoped it would please you. Then I bought the material from a little shop. . . . But I don't know why I'm telling you all my secrets! I had a feeling you'd like it, and you're such a dear in always noticing what people wear. . . . Now I'm going to wash up."

Jack sprang to his feet and stood between her and the plates which she was trying to reach.

"You're going to do no such thing!"

"Please, Jack, as a favour. . . . Sit down again and go on with your pipe. You should tell your club always to put in a dish-cloth when plates have to be washed. . . . Never mind! I can manage with some grass. . . . And here . . . Jack, it *is*! . . . here's a four-leaf clover! Take it . . . and all the luck in the world with it!"

As she held out the tiny emblem, Jack caught her wet fingers and kissed them:

"'One leaf is for hope' . . ."

"'And one is for faith' . . ."

The colour flamed into Joan's cheeks, and she lowered her eyes. The pressure on her hand ground the bones together as Jack added his line:

"'And one . . . is . . . for love, you know.'"

"'And God . . .'" Jack dear, you're hurting me!"
Forcing a smile, Joan withdrew her hand.

"'And God put another in . . . for luck,'"

she sang;

"'If you search you will find where they grow.' . . ."

Slipping his arm through hers, Jack added his own resonant barytone:

*"But you must have hope and you must have faith,
You must love and be strong; and so,
If you work, if you wait, you will find the place
Where the four-leaf clovers grow."*

In the silence that followed Joan could hear heavy breathing, though she dared not look into Jack's eyes.

"During the war I remember singing that to the soldiers," she murmured.

"And one . . . is . . . for love, you know."

Turning swiftly, Joan knelt again by the edge of the stream and dipped the first plate into the water.

"You can dry them on my hanky, Jack," she called over her shoulder. "And then, if I want a hanky for myself, you must lend me yours. Sit down, like a good boy. . . . There's something I want to say to you. That absurd song . . . made me . . . think of it. . . . I told you I'd had . . . rather a bad war: I was dead, cold, indifferent till you began to be so sweet to me. And then I felt myself coming to life again. There's hardly anything in the world I wouldn't do for you; but . . . I want you to understand . . . that we can never be anything more than friends."

Though she could not see him, Joan noticed that the plates by her side were not taken away as she washed them. Summoning resolution to turn, she found Jack standing with his hands in his pockets, kicking a pattern in the soft earth with the point of his shoe.

"I wonder what you *would* do for me," he murmured.

"Anything that . . . you ask me . . . except one."

"Will you drop this Cairo business?"

"If you . . . insist. But, Jack dear, I've nothing in the world but a little money I saved when I was working in the city and the little I make by odd jobs. Three months' board and lodging is a consideration; and if I can let my little flat . . ."

"I understand all that. And you're a genius with your clothes and you live on next to nothing, but it's not the kind of life I choose to see you leading."

The tone of possession startled Joan; and, without answering, she set herself to dry the plates.

"I'm a philosopher," she protested at length. "I can meet rich people without being envious; and I can rub along in my own way without complaining."

"I know; but it's a way I don't like. In spite of what you call my extravagance, I have rather more money than I spend. You say you'll do anything I ask you . . ."

Before he could finish the sentence, Joan scrambled to her feet and laid her hand on his lips.

"If I'd guessed what a child you were, I'd never have given that promise! Jack, you're marvellously generous, but you ought to know that women can't take money from men."

"I gathered our friendship was to be something out of the ordinary."

"It's that already. I want it to go on for ever, just as it's done this last week."

Knocking out his pipe, Jack began to load the luncheon-basket while Joan put on her hat.

"As it was . . . before to-day?" he suggested.

"No! I said what I did to explain why I'm . . . an unsatisfactory friend."

They returned to the car in silence. As Jack bent to

strap the luncheon-basket in place, he broke the silence to murmur:

"Remember, Joanie, you're only one-and-twenty! In time we shall be able to think of the war almost without feeling it, in time we shall hardly think of it at all." . . .

"Some may," Joan whispered.

"I'm not going to talk about love," he continued gently, "because you know I love you too much to worry you. If we find later on . . ."

"We shan't. And then you'll reproach me."

"Reproach you! Sweet child, I love you so much that if you tell me to say good-bye now, I'll . . . I'll do it."

"I don't think I could bear that!" Joan bit her lip as her feeble selfishness stood revealed. At their first meeting she had scented danger; at the second she condoned this perilous intimacy by reminding herself that Jack would soon be going back to the Staff College; as her appetite for his love grew with the eating, she consoled herself with the thought that three months in Cairo with Lady Henson would end for her what she could not end for herself. "I mean, you *have* been so sweet," she added weakly. "I'd sooner do anything than hurt you." . . .

On their return to London that night, Jack suggested no plans for the next day.

"I'll call for you in the morning," he promised; "and we can decide then what we want to do."

Joan, who had hardly spoken since the end of their dinner at Winchester, thanked him with a smile and hurried indoors. Drawing her bedroom curtains aside, she turned out the lights and sat looking up at the stars. What *did* happen to people when they died?

There was no place in the firmament for the old heaven or hell; your soul could not transmigrate, because the soul was born with and in the body, by the union of two parent personalities; when nerves and brain died, the spirit died too; and the only survival was in the persons of your children. In one sense the soul was immortal, for personality sent out waves that spread through infinity; the personality of Curtis Anker had engulfed her in a wave of light and sound till she fancied that he was by her side, but his spirit could send out no more waves when his heart was still and his brain had ceased to throb.

"I swear to you, Curtis, I'll never do anything to make you ashamed of me!"

Joan heard again her own hysterical voice on the night of the Warriors' Ball, when she had played with her great temptation and achieved her great escape. It would have been so easy to find a man and to say "Be kind to me! Help me to forget"; so easy to live for the sake of forgetting all that had made life beautiful. She could have rushed after pleasure like those weak, tragic creatures at dinner; and in time she would no doubt have forgotten. But it was a coward's alternative to suicide; and, though she now knew that Curtis could not see her, he had grafted on her something of his own pride.

Would she break faith with Curtis by marrying some one else? Jack had revived the feeling which she experienced at her first meeting with Curtis and seemed to lose for ever at his death: she had become of paramount importance to him, and the knowledge that she mattered once more set her once more athirst for life. Had she never met Curtis, it might have been possible to exist in solitude; but he had taught

her that life was a thing to be shared, and she had learned from his death that, when love had been kindled, it must be fed.

But not by Jack's suffering! And, after to-day, they could not keep up the pretence of an unconventional holiday. . . .

Turning on the light, Joan began a letter which should say all that she had failed to express in speaking to him:

"My dear one, do you remember when you took me to lunch at Claridge's? You said you were not conscious of having done anything for me, and I said I knew you weren't. I've tried to shew you, but I don't believe you know yet. Your wonderful care and gentleness and consideration are the big things in life to me now. How glorious it would be if we could go on like this for ever!

"We can't—obviously. When you marry, I shall have to drop out of your life. And long, long before that we shall find we're living in a dream that must end some day. It's a one-sided arrangement at present. I have infinite gratitude and great love for you; what I should like to do would be to give all of it to you, to help you, take care of you, wear myself out and use myself up to make you happy—if you'd only shew me how to do it. But I've a terrible feeling this isn't what you want. Isn't it a different kind of love you're looking for? What's the right word? I suppose 'passion.' Darling, I'm incapable of feeling passion for any one in the world. I did once; and I believe that love of this kind never comes a second time; it will certainly never come a second time to me.

"You talked to-day of the changes that time brings.

If you asked me to marry you, I could say 'yes' without feeling that I was being unfaithful to any one; but I should always feel that I'd betrayed you if I hadn't warned you not to expect too much. I may have to protect you against yourself.

"Don't let's talk of this again for ever so long! Our love is so beautiful that I can't bear to see it disturbed.

"Good-night! God bless you always!"

Joan was reading her letter again by the unemotional light of the morning when Jack came in to propose another expedition. He kissed her hand, as he had done two or three times before, and presented her with a bunch of malmaisons, as he had never failed to do for a week. In manner and speech, however, he gave no sign that he too saw the milestone which they had reached the day before; and Joan was so thankful to be spared an ultimatum that she thrust the letter into a drawer and greeted him in the mood of their earliest meeting.

"You *have* made a beautiful little doll's house of this place," he exclaimed in admiration of her bright cushions and gay chintzes. "Would you like to undertake a much bigger job?"

"For you? Yes, Jack."

"I signed the agreement for Leslie's rooms this morning. Would you like to do the whole thing for me: furniture, decorations, china, glass . . . and a mysterious thing called household linen? I should love to have some household linen."

"I'll make it the most adorable place in London!"

"I believe you will. We might have a preliminary inspection this morning; and then I'll abduct you to

Burnham Beeches. I feel a morbid craving for Burnham Beeches to-day. Do you know a woman called . . . Morley-Shipton."

"I've never heard of her."

"She makes a profession of decorating other people's houses. I asked her what the tariff would be for eligible bachelor chambers . . ."

"Jack, I do this for love or not at all!"

"Then I shall furnish it myself with second-hand bamboo overmantels, horse-hair sofas and walnut sideboards."

"Then I shan't come to see you."

"I shan't invite you. All will be over between us, but you'll hear of me as paying marked attention to Mrs. Morley-Shipton, who is a fascinating if somewhat damaged widow of sixty-one."

"I don't believe there's no such a person."

"There isn't, but it's a jolly name. I should like to know some one of that name. You'll have to take the usual fee, Joan. You've asked me many times to find you work. . . . Tell me what you think of this."

Plunging a hand into his pocket, Jack drew out a wad of letters and a cardboard box. As she unfolded the tissue-paper and took out an emerald four-leaf clover, he pulled a chair to her writing-table and began to compose a telegram.

"It's very pretty," she answered, as she laid the box on the table by his hand.

"I hoped you'd like it."

It was Joan's turn to realize that they were sliding from one intimacy to another; and, though she was not prepared to argue with him, she felt, more surely than any argument could prove, that an act which

was innocent in itself might cease to be innocent when it was repeated.

"But I'm not going to take it, Jack dear," she told him.

"I should hate to use violence to a woman. At least, that's not quite true." He counted the words of the telegram and signed his name. "*Deeply regret already engaged.*" I don't regret it in the least. I never want to see Beatrice Anker again. I should like to do quite a lot of violence to women who *won't* take 'no' for an answer." . . .

In the middle of his narration, Joan walked away and began to put on her veil. This one name, it seemed, would always make her heart race; in some way she must stare this spectre out of countenance. As Jack paused, she asked, without turning her head:

"But why don't you go, Jack? If she's had an unhappy life and wants to make a fresh start . . ."

"I'd like to stand by poor old Leslie, but life's not long enough for the racket of being kicked out of the house the first time she has a row with her husband. Lord, if she's going to say one of these days: 'I understand Leslie was dining with you last week. He that is not with me is against me.' . . ."

"We'll hope it's going to be a success this time."

"It's a big risk. . . . But, then, I think any man who marries a widow . . ."

Joan turned in open-mouthed surprise:

"My *dear* Jack, you're as bad as Mr. Weller Senior!"

"No, I mean it! Marriage is a pretty difficult thing at the best of times; it becomes more difficult the older you are, the more habits you've acquired. The only hope is to go into it like babes in the wood, neither

knowing more than the other. Then, whatever mistakes you perpetrate, it's a splendid adventure; you preserve the romance of it all your life; you're bound more and more closely together by the discoveries you make together, the difficulties you go through together." . . .

As he crumpled a pile of old envelopes, Joan drew her letter from its drawer and tore it into small pieces.

"And if a woman had been married before, . . . however much you cared for her?"

"I wouldn't marry her if she were the last woman in the world."

In the short silence that followed, Joan picked up the jeweller's box and began to play with it:

"You may be right, but you've wandered right away from the point: I can't take this, Jack."

"Why not?"

"It's so hard to explain. I wrote you a letter last night; but I've destroyed it because it doesn't express what I mean. There are bits . . . I said I asked nothing better than to cut myself in little pieces if that made for your happiness. But I was afraid, I said, that wasn't what you wanted. I shall never change." . . .

"Darling, I beg you not to say that! We're changing every day."

Joan could not repress a shudder at the recollection of his tone in dogmatizing about women and marriage:

"I wonder whether we ever change in the big things. Do you?"

"I sincerely hope so."

"Perhaps . . . we shall both change. But, while I feel as I do, I *can't* go on taking things from you."

"And yet you'd cut yourself in little pieces for me?"

Joan, there are lines in your forehead, and the corners of your mouth are turning down, and your eyes look as if you were going to cry. . . . This is no way to spend almost our last day together."

In her general forgetfulness of time, Joan had overlooked his many references to the end of his leave. Two days before, they had stabbed her; now she could hardly wait in patience for the hour when he would say good-bye.

"I'm sorry, Jack," she sighed.

"You must shew your repentance by accepting my present. . . . And, Joan, you'll remember I didn't introduce this subject."

"But I'm so afraid you will."

Jack laughed and led her to the door without answering.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERLUDE

. . . Hark, those two in the hazel coppice—
A boy and a girl, if the good fates please,
 Making love, say,—
 The happier they!
Draw yourself up from the light of the moon,
And let them pass, as they will too soon. . . .
—ROBERT BROWNING: *De Gustibus*.

A PERFECT car, though I say it as shouldn't," murmured Jack.

"A perfect driver. I *am* the right person to say that," Joan proclaimed.

"A perfect companion."

"A perfect day."

"Perfect privacy."

"Oh, and a perfect world, Jack dear!"

In the cool perfection of a late-summer morning, the perfect car droned its way out of London to the perfect halting-place for a perfect meal. There was no need any longer for them to skirmish into hidden corners of unfrequented restaurants; no need to enter a theatre as though they were truants from school. If perplexed letters, with an Invercaldy postmark, came to Jack's new quarters in Piccadilly, they had to await his return at midnight; if impatient messages from Bertie Millbank heated the telephone at his club, it was unfortunate—from Bertie's point of view—that he never telephoned until the perfect car was thirty miles away from London.

"Will Captain Keithley be so kind as to say when and where I can meet him?" the last had run. *"Captain Bagshot and I have promised to arrange with him which week-end we are all going to Marston Park."* . . .

A consciousness that he had given Isabel Mordaunt some sort of conditional promise, a guilty consciousness that he had cost poor Bertie an outburst of temper clouded Jack's serenity for some two minutes after his reading the message. Then he recalled that he had sent Beatrice Anker a telegram, pleading previous engagements for every one of the four dates that she offered him. Bertie must go or not, as he pleased; Reggie would be there to keep him in countenance; and the week-end after this latest petulant challenge was probably the last that Joan would be able to spare before the shadows of Camberley engulfed and parted them.

"And I loathe everything about Beatrice," Jack muttered drowsily, his face to the sky and his body stretched full-length in the bracken by the roadside, at the moment when a reluctant week-end party was uneasily assembling at Waterloo.

It was a convention at Marston Park that almost every visitor declared publicly, after every visit, that he would never go there again. One exception was furnished by Jack, whose moderate liking for golf and good living was outweighed by his dislike of his hostess; another by Reggie, who maintained—with justification—that he could always be more rude to Beatrice than even she dared be to him. Of the rest, a few went for individual reasons: Leslie Cornwallis because he was "unofficially" engaged to Beatrice; Isabel because she hoped to meet Jack under her

cousin's roof; Frank Wharton because he mapped England by the places where he was likely to meet Isabel Mordaunt. The others, of whom Bertie represented a large class, came and came again in search of ultimate peace which was always denied them for the duration of their visit.

"I can't afford to quarrel with her," he confessed to Reggie, when they met at the station to lift their voices in objection against Jack. "A woman with a tongue like that . . ."

He broke off to ponder three engagements that had fallen in pieces because Beatrice, in imperious mood, had elected to oppose them.

"I don't want to," said Reggie. "After all, it is the best club-house in the Home Counties. I admit I used to miss my game when Beatrice ended her happy married life with Curtis; and you may thank me for bringing Leslie up to the scratch."

"He's been infatuated for years."

"Ye-es. . . . But she wasn't very encouraging." As the too handsome face of Cornwallis appeared at the barrier, Reggie loosed a view-holloa and strolled forward to meet him. "I say, old son, put me wise before we get there: is it official yet? About you and Beatrice, I mean?"

By nodding to Bertie and giving elaborate instructions to his porter, Leslie secured a moment's reflection before turning to meet Reggie's direct attack.

"I've not seen anything about it in the papers," he laughed. "No doubt it'll be there as soon as there's anything to announce."

"You're as bad as Jack Keithley!" Reggie exclaimed in disgust. "I spotted him at a theatre last week, hiding away in a box with some fair young thing; so,

when I ran into him at the club, I asked how soon I was to congratulate him. The old man was rather peeved at first; then he came out with your slogan: 'As soon as there's anything to announce, you'll no doubt see it in the papers.' I don't call it matey."

Leslie smiled imperturbably and looked along the platform.

"Is Jack coming?" he asked.

"No one's been able to find him," Bertie answered.

With the arrival of Isabel, they took their seats; and, while the other three bantered and sparred, Bertie read through the series of letters which Lady Keithley had been sending him ever since Jack's sudden departure from Invercaldy. It would have been easier to ridicule her obvious fears if he had not himself been disquieted by Jack's change of demeanour: when a man who had won his way to the Staff College by dogged work and enthusiasm developed a distaste for the army, when the most open of friends abruptly withheld all confidences, there was but too great reason for suspecting a reaction from excessive strictness of upbringing. Why had Jack, who usually loathed the false pleasures of London, now found it necessary to make his headquarters there? If he wanted to take a girl to a theatre, why must he weave a mystery about it? Whatever he was doing, why must he hide himself day and night from his friends?

Even without the stimulus of these pathetic, fumbling letters, Bertie felt that he could not remain idle. The Keithleys held him responsible for their son; and, though a man of eight-and-twenty would not consent to be dry-nursed, Jack might allow himself to be reminded by a friend of greater experience that he offered a big target to the unscrupulous.

"If he's having an affair with a chorus-girl, there must at least be no half-baked romantic nonsense about marrying her," he decided. "And it will be best for all parties concerned if he marries some decent woman who'll keep him from running after chorus-girls."

Glancing carelessly round the carriage, Bertie caught Isabel off her guard. She was looking out of window with an air of greater fatigue than was warranted by Reggie's tiresome pleasantries; he chose to fancy that she too was disappointed by Jack's defection; and he resolved that, as soon as this party was over, he would run Jack to earth and give them a chance of meeting. She would make an admirable wife for Jack; the Keithleys were devoted to her; and marriage would rescue her from this empty, humiliating life of making herself useful in other people's houses.

Watching the shadow of weariness on a face that was usually too proud to shew emotion, Bertie calculated that Isabel must have been travelling this round for nearly eight years. Trained for no career and thrown among people richer than herself, her allowance of three hundred pounds a year fitted her to be a "country-house girl" and prevented her becoming anything else. Twenty-five? Twenty-seven? She was fixed in a constellation where some observers were recalling with unkind length of memory that they had seen her shining brightly for a number of years which she must be trying to forget. Bertie did not know her age; but, in looking at her tired eyes, he felt that the country-house girl was becoming the superfluous girl and that she felt it more poignantly than any one. The narrowness and fanaticism that informed her moral judgements betrayed her own disappointment and hunger. Bred in circumstances very similar to

Joan Prendergast's, she had clung, through faith or fear, to the conventional rule; and a barren virtue was her consolation.

"I've not seen you since Invercaldy," Bertie began, moving into the seat next to her. "If you're not booked up, let's dine together one night next week."

"I should love that. I don't know how long Beatrice is expecting me to stay." . . .

"I'll get hold of Jack," continued Bertie. "I've entirely lost track of him." . . .

"We may find him here," Isabel interrupted. "She told me she'd sent him an ultimatum."

"I don't think we shall." . . .

The question was answered when they reached Marston Park and found Beatrice Anker, in yellow stockings, red skirt, green jumper and grey hat, frowning over a pile of telegrams and letters.

"Hullo! How many of you are there?" she enquired without looking up. "The Edgbastons can't come, Isabel. Nor can Jack Keithley. Can't or *won't*. Look through these things, will you? and see if any one else is coming. And then you might take charge," she added in an undertone. "I've a lot of things to see to. Pretend I'm not here."

Though—to Isabel's thinking—a fascinated rabbit could more easily have ignored the presence of a boa-constrictor, she received her instructions in silence for fear of betraying her disappointment at the news that Jack was not coming. The obstinate hope of meeting him had fortified her against her cousin's arrogance; but now, in the presence of three men all more or less intimidated, amid a murmur of insincere compliments, with her hands full of thankless work which any hostess ought to have done herself, she felt suddenly

overwhelmed. It was degrading to earn her bed and board in this way; more degrading to have it proclaimed publicly; most degrading of all to know that Beatrice's other victims ended every discussion of her by repeating—without a shred of justification—that for ten years she had been a second mother to a girl who could make no return.

After inspecting the name-cards on the doors and seeing that the luggage was distributed in the right rooms, Isabel returned to the hall and made for the turret-wing where Beatrice sought asylum from her own guests. As she passed the sofa on which Reggie was sprawling, he called out to propose a cocktail.

"Well, ring the bell, then. *I'm* not the butler," she answered tartly. "You're in the red room, Bertie; and you'll have to share a bathroom with Leslie. Dinner's at a quarter-past eight."

Checking at the foot of the stairs, she turned aside to order the wine. ("Champagne," she murmured to herself. "It'll put us all in a better temper.") Then, with a last glance at the letters in her hand, she ventured into the turret-wing. Though the present party was commonplace enough, Beatrice's correspondence suggested that her social ambitions were growing; two cabinet ministers, of whom one had self-confessedly been to Marston earlier in the summer, proposed themselves for later week-ends; and, of the other high-sounding names in the list, four-fifths were the acquisition of the last eighteen months. In the formula which Beatrice herself favoured, there was no point in being stifled by frumps and bores when there still *were* amusing people in the world; in the formula of a critical cousin, she was consolidating every yard of her advance and making each victory the starting-point

for a new attack. Providence had given her beauty and an imperious temper; Curtis had provided her with money, a house and an unassailable position; power, spreading far beyond the parasites, like Reggie, whom she fed, far beyond the mutes, like Bertie, whom she petrified, was her last objective.

"Poor old Leslie," murmured Isabel, looking down from the gallery window on a languid, loosely-knit figure. Apart from his good-looks and a younger son's pittance, he could contribute nothing to the campaign of ambition. A creditable private in the stalwart bodyguard with whose aid Beatrice rushed the restaurants and theatres of London, he lacked every quality of a consort. "If he knew what he was letting himself in for . . ."

While one guest looked after the household and the others looked after themselves, their hostess lay stretched on a long chair with her feet to a roaring log-fire.

"Have you settled everything?" she asked impatiently, as Isabel appeared with her pile of letters.

"Pretty well. . . . Frank Wharton wants to motor down on Sunday. Will you let him know by telephone? He wrote on Monday, but is afraid the letter must have miscarried." . . .

"I had the letter all right," answered Beatrice, "with two brace of grouse to sweeten it. I was waiting to talk to you about that: he's your friend." . . .

"My dear, I don't care whether you invite him or not."

"He bores me," yawned Beatrice. "You can invite him if you don't put him anywhere near me. I hear he pursued you up to Invercaldy."

"He came for a few days while I was there."

"He's very faithful."

"Men of that age become creatures of habit."

"Like Leslie. He's a perfect nuisance. I have to shut myself in here to avoid him."

Isabel looked up in surprise; but her cousin's frowning face told her nothing.

"I should have thought you could always get rid of people when they worried you."

"Leslie's useful in some ways. And I hate scenes. He always makes a scene when I send him away. He doesn't realize that the only means of keeping some men quiet is to say you'll marry them."

"I should think very few men realize that," Isabel answered coldly.

The note of contempt brought Beatrice to a vigorous offensive, though she masked her attack with a laugh.

"Romantic as ever! Are you still in love with the Keithley boy?" she asked.

"Oh, Jack's one of my oldest friends," Isabel answered lazily.

"I asked if you were still in love with him."

"I've not said I ever *was* in love with him."

"If it's all over now, I wonder you don't make sure of Frank Wharton," yawned Beatrice. "You can't afford *not* to marry; and Wharton's old enough to have got over any nonsense; the mistake I made in marrying Curtis was that he hadn't. At least, that was the first mistake; the second was that I didn't bring everything to an end much sooner."

"It would have looked rather bad," suggested Isabel.

"What d' you mean?"

Though she had meant to keep a curb on herself, this brutal balancing of a man whom she was avoiding

against a man who was avoiding her broke down Isabel's self-control:

"Well, Curtis was tremendously popular. All his friends would have said you'd married him for his money and got rid of him only when you found some one else with rather more. As long as it was to your advantage, you forgave him." . . .

"I could never be sure of the evidence," Beatrice drawled complacently, though Isabel knew that the counter-attack was only suspended. "When I made up my mind that I could stand it no longer, I wondered why I'd been fool enough to wait so long." Reaching for a bunch of keys, she unlocked a drawer in her writing-table and took out a foolscap registered-envelope. "You can read that if you think it will amuse you. I went to a firm of detectives (that's their report) and found that I could have divorced him at any time in the last six years. They'd been watching him on behalf of some one else. . . . Why, at the time of his death . . ."

"I don't think I want to read this, B.," Isabel interrupted, as the envelope landed in her lap.

"Yes, you must! In your heart of hearts you've always sided with Curtis. At the time of his death, it may interest you to know he was living with a woman . . ." Pulling the typewritten report from its envelope, Beatrice turned to the last page. "No, it was a girl this time. I admit that *did* rather surprise me. She was only about nineteen and came of quite decent people, I believe. A man who could behave like that . . . Nothing was sacred to him. I was too young to realize that, when I married; but a man like Wharton has sown his wild oats and wants to settle down."

"And if I tell you for the hundredth time that I

don't want to marry him, that I'm not in love with him?"

Beatrice laughed harshly and threw herself with characteristic violence into her chair:

"You'll only make me think that you're still in love with the Keithley boy. Mind you, I daresay he's all right. I can't get on with him, myself: he's too inhuman. But he's heir to the title, isn't he? And I've always heard there's a good deal of money." . . .

"Oh, *don't* be so worldly, B.!"

"I'm being practical. . . . Well, is he in love with you?"

"How *should* I know?"

"Then he's not," decided Beatrice with an assurance that sounded triumphant.

Isabel composed herself by turning over the pages of the report in her hands. Though she could easily have struck her cousin, an unsympathetic listener was almost better than none; Jack's love for her was challenged, and, if she did not uphold it, judgement would go by default.

"It's so hard to say when you've known some one all your life. I see what he's like when he's with me; and I've watched him when he's with other people. We have the same point of view about everything! Jack's a wonderful idealist; and he lives up to his ideals. . . . Romantic you'd call it."

"Has he ever said anything to make you *think* he's in love with you?"

"Not in words. . . . But, when he went out to France . . . and whenever he was home on leave, there was a change." In the joy of proving Jack's devotion, Isabel abandoned her customary reserve. "In the old days, when he was going back to school, he

used to kiss his mother . . . and then me, as a matter of course; it went on all the time he was at Cambridge; and when he came back from India. . . . During the war . . . I was writing to him every day; . . . we came ever so much closer together; . . . and he gave up kissing me. It wasn't a matter of course any more; and he hadn't the right to kiss me in any other way. . . . He was in love with me then, . . . though I can't prove it, of course. Now you know as much as I do, B., and it's time for me to go and dress."

"You haven't said whether you want the Wharton man invited," was the only comment that Beatrice saw fit to make.

In the few minutes left her between dressing and going down to dinner, Isabel looked through the report of Curtis Anker's last infidelities, not without a hope of finding that Beatrice had been punished in advance for her insolent self-absorption. The strange matter of the report made her feel that she was watching a play from the prompter's place in the wings: men whom she was accustomed to seeing in their social make-up appeared unrecognized in the close illumination of the footlights, leading another and more mysterious life, under the furtive surveillance of spies who reported dispassionately the times and places of meetings that, for the actors, were uncounted ecstatic moments in a drab eternity. Curtis was probably no worse than many another man, examined under a microscope, but Isabel was not deeply interested in him; to a woman it was more exciting to speculate about the motives that led these other women to throw in their lot with him. Surely they knew that, with no bond but the flesh, their passion must burn itself out in ashes of disillusion and reproach? Or did each

fancy that she would succeed where others had failed? Or did they shut their ears to the questionings of sense and conscience? What were their feelings when, for the first time, they surrendered to that which every woman was taught to regard as sin? How would this Prendergast child, the last of the series, explain or justify herself?

In books and plays there were women who wanted children without being bothered with a husband; there were girls who despaired of marrying and were resolved at all costs to taste whatever life could offer. This was the first time that Isabel had met with an instance that could be supported by names and dates. Vague hunger, vague curiosity were stirred; and, as she locked the report in her dressing-case, she resolved to study it again at her leisure.

When their hostess strode into the drawing-room twenty minutes after the last of her guests, Isabel recalled with dismay that a suspended counter-attack had still to be launched some time, on some pretext, at some one. Leslie and Bertie were like boys with guilty consciences when a master has kept the school waiting for prayers and comes in search of blood; they took refuge in nervous compliments on Beatrice's dress; and their gloom lightened when they saw the quarrel fastened on some one else.

"Isabel kept me talking till after eight," Beatrice announced coldly. "Come on!"

Though threatened more than once, the attack was not launched during dinner; and Isabel began to hope that it would spend itself in a private midnight explosion at the foot of her bed. After dinner, she knew that she would be required to play poker, her losses publicly guaranteed in advance; after that, to sing, if

the men were too comatose to dance. There seemed no time for a scene until Beatrice created it, with the arrival of coffee, by summoning a parliament of five and reopening the debate whether Frank Wharton should be encouraged to come down on Sunday. From this it was an easy step to ask the others whether they did not think it criminal to throw away so good an opportunity.

After an initial protest, Isabel entered composedly into conversation with Bertie. If she allowed herself to be driven from the room, she would present her adversary with a weapon to win all future battles. It was only when Reggie Bagshot added facetiousness to insult that she lost patience. Hitherto Beatrice had spared her when there were men present; but now sex-loyalty yielded to a lust for cruelty. Isabel felt her hands trembling so violently that she had to clutch the sides of her chair; before she could speak, however, Bertie intervened to protect her.

"Isn't this a matter for Isabel to decide?" she heard.

"She'll *decide*," Beatrice conceded; "I'm only giving her the advice that any sensible man or woman . . ."

"I beg your pardon! I didn't understand that she'd come to us for our advice."

The ensuing silence was broken by a snigger from Reggie. When Leslie proposed bridge as a diversion, Bertie suggested to Isabel that they should see if it was warm enough to walk in the garden; later, when she began to play, he stationed himself by her side. Though little was said, she could rank him as an ally; and, when he confessed himself too tired to dance, she smiled with grim gratification at finding one man who

would back her revolt against the despotism which Beatrice had exercised for ten years.

Though there were but three men and two women to watch or take part in the struggle, they were as fickle as the biggest mob. With revolt successfully proclaimed, even Leslie raised his voice in protest against some charge: "*You know perfectly well that's not true, Beatrice.*" Reggie added a tattoo of his jackal heels; and, after a moment to gauge the general hostility, Beatrice came down on the side of the insurgents.

"Unless any one wants to play poker, I think I shall go to bed. Will you find out what everybody wants to do about breakfast, Isabel?" she asked with unwonted gentleness. "Good-night."

Though Isabel was careful not to betray her new feeling of victory, the atmosphere of fickle change affected her own rigid self-discipline; and she resolved to demand an explanation and apology while Beatrice was still humble and while the sense of the house was against her. By the morning there would be a reaction; within a week she might expect to find a legend that dear Beatrice had done everything to find her a suitable husband but that she threw away her own chances and snapped at the hand which was feeding her. Already the invertebrate Leslie was edging to the door: in the morning, when Beatrice said "*I suppose you all sat up, talking about me,*" he would be able to answer, "*I went to bed five minutes after you.*"

Isabel tidied away the cards and began to write the orders for the morning.

"Tea at nine for me, please," said Bertie. "And breakfast upstairs at half-past."

"The same for me, please," added Reggie. "I say, Isabel, if you want to have your revenge, write down

that Beatrice is to be called at six with cold beef and beer on a tray."

"I don't want to have any *revenge*, thank you," she answered loftily, as she carried her slate to the butler's pantry.

Leaving Bertie to turn out the lights, she tried the doors and made her way upstairs to the turret-wing. Her two encounters had given her no new weapon of attack; but she was willing to fight without arms so long as Beatrice was in her present mood of dejected isolation. If the mood had passed, she was willing to fight recklessly, for fighting's sake, to unloose the bitterness engendered of so many slights, even though she were beaten in the end. Beatrice should at least be taught that, when grinning men were present, she must not dispose so lightly of girls who "could not afford *not to marry*."

Half-way to the bedroom door, Isabel checked in dread that Beatrice might be already asleep. She hurried on in joyous hope of having to wake her and only paused on the threshold to mark a line of yellow light round the jambs. "*I've stood a good deal, but there are some things I won't stand . . .*" would make a sufficiently unambiguous opening. Isabel drew a deep breath, and her fingers sought the handle. At the sound of voices she checked again: her attack must not be weakened by the presence of a maid. She was creeping away on tip-toe when a deeper note told her that one voice was a man's; without taking time to wonder, she walked down and went to her room by the main staircase as soon as she recognized Leslie's laugh.

It would not have interested her to hear what was being said; and she would have felt disgraced by listen-

ing. It was enough that Leslie was in Beatrice's room and that she knew him to be there. The knowledge gave her a hold over her tormentor: insubstantial indeed if they were going to be married, but of paramount strength if Beatrice decided at the last moment in favour of a more ambitious union.

"And I believe she *will* throw him over," . . . whispered Isabel.

This, perhaps, was the explanation of Beatrice and her eternal retinue of unwilling victims: she needed the admiration and homage of men; she attached them to herself, one after another; and, when they tired of her, she held them by reproaches and intimidation. Cold-blooded herself, she ran no danger of losing her head; and to hold a man enslaved was gratifying to her taste for power. Reviewed in this new light, the time since Curtis Anker's death and even the last years of his life contained names that invited explanation: people were always saying that Beatrice was sure to marry this man or that, but nothing came of it. A reason was at last provided for this room in the turret-wing.

"The moment she marries, all the others will drop away. And Beatrice knows it," Isabel decided. "What does she expect to get out of it all?"

Opening her door, she listened for a moment and then walked boldly to Leslie's room. The house was in darkness; and she was astounded to find that she had been brooding until half-past one. There was no answer to her knock; and, when she turned the handle, the room was empty. Taking an envelope, she wrote: "*Will you leave a note in the passage to say when you want to be called and what you'd like for breakfast?*"

You had gone upstairs before I could ask you. Isabel Mordaunt, 1.30 a.m."

Next day, though she hardly expected that Leslie would be rash enough to explain himself, she was not surprised when he waylaid her in the garden to thank her for her note:

"It was so kind of you to think of it. Small wonder you didn't find me, though: I was out here, getting a breath of fresh air."

Isabel raised her eyebrows slightly:

"All that time?"

"I didn't look at my watch."

"You went up about eleven."

"Twelve . . . one . . . Jove! That's two and a half hours!"

If he had left her alone, Isabel felt that she might have spared him; though he recognized her only as Beatrice's cousin, she could dispense with his characterless good-looks. As, however, he chose to lounge into her life when she was cutting Beatrice's flowers for Beatrice's table, after writing Beatrice's letters, he must take the consequences of being Beatrice's lover.

"I hope you didn't have any difficulty about getting in," she murmured without troubling to look at him.

"I was careful to leave one of the smoking-room windows open."

"Oh? I tried them all before I went to bed."

Leslie gave himself a moment's grace by coughing; and, when Isabel straightened herself to face him, his cheeks were scarlet and his mouth twisted.

"But look here!" he began; then, as she turned towards the house. "We can hardly leave it like this."

"Isn't it the only thing you *can* do?"

Leslie waited in silence until she was half-way across the lawn; then, without seeming to hurry, he vanished abruptly into the woods.

So complete was his discomfiture that Isabel was tempted to follow him and to say that she had no intention of using her new knowledge against him. Her duel was with Beatrice; and, if she left him to suffer unrelieved, it was because she could deal Beatrice a deadlier hurt by saying nothing and allowing Leslie to reveal that they were in her power. When the party set out for the links, she accepted without comment that Leslie was staying behind with letters to write. If Beatrice, too, had stayed behind, it would have been a natural consequence of her discovery and a characteristic act of contempt for those who needed her in their foursome. From policy or ignorance, however, Beatrice did what was least expected of her; no shadow of uneasiness marked her manner to Isabel, and, in riding rough-shod over the others, she seemed to have forgotten the hostility which she had aroused the night before.

"If she's going on like this, I shall clear out to-morrow night," Bertie threatened.

"And leave me single-handed?" Isabel asked reproachfully.

"I don't want to do that. . . . I suppose we must make the best of it. . . . By the way, I put through a trunk call to Jack this morning to know if he'd dine on Wednesday. *You'll* come whatever happens." . . .

"Wasn't he in?"

"He never is, nowadays. I said he was to let me know the moment he *did* come in."

Whatever time Jack returned to his rooms, no message was sent to Marston Park until Bertie was

preparing for bed. Then a contented voice whispered thinly from a distance of sixty miles :

"Sorry I was out when you rang up. I was in the country . . . quite near you, by the way. . . . Motor-ing. . . . Wasn't it a perfectly gorgeous day? The little car's running like a dream. I'm off again first thing in the morning, so you mustn't keep me talking. . . . By the way, I'm afraid I shan't be able to dine on Wednesday: I'm booked up every moment of my time till I go back to Camberley. Ask me some time later. Good-night, old man."

By the time that Bertie hung up the receiver, Isabel was gone to bed. Next morning she had started alone for church before he came down; and, on returning from the links for luncheon, he—in common with the rest—found his attention claimed by the unexpected development of Beatrice's counter-attack. As they sat on the lawn in a half-circle, watching Reggie mix cocktails, the butler emerged from the house and announced that Mr. Wharton had arrived.

"Another dollop of gin for the gay companion of my hot-blooded youth!" cried Reggie.

The others turned automatically towards the house and, as automatically, turned back to see, out of the corners of their eyes, whether Isabel was betraying emotion.

"I suppose you know every one," Beatrice drawled indifferently to the newcomer.

"I . . . well, by Jove, Leslie! And Isabel! This is nice!" Wharton wheezed. "Thought I was going to be late; my young partner asked me to give him a lift to Sunningdale, thirty miles out of my way. Fortunately my old Sheffield-Foster can still do her

fifty to fifty-five, not like that horrible Durand I brought here last time." . . .

As Wharton plunged into a technical comparison of the cars which he had once owned with those which he had refused to buy, the others went back to their interrupted conversations till Beatrice led the way in to luncheon. For the honour of the house, Bertie simulated interest in a man who had only made himself interesting by becoming love-sick for a girl half his age; but no acting was proof against the tedium of a monologue on creature comforts. As figure and face suggested, Wharton was an oracle on wine-committees and a bogey to head-waiters; but too great wealth at an age too tender had dimmed his eye for light and shade. He refused to travel, because he disliked the ways and languages of foreign lands; to read, because other people's ideas unsettled him; little by little, before he met Isabel, he was refusing to entertain, because it exposed him to the reprisal of being entertained with food and wine inferior to his own. Motoring was his one abiding enthusiasm; and for twenty years the road to Brighton had been familiar with a vast car, a muffled figure and a shrinking companion who clung to him for support or from affection as he raced in and out of London. His adventures among women began cynically, because he was convinced that all had their price; they were conducted sordidly, because women who were allowed to be romantic were encouraged to become exacting. Wharton, before he was thirty, realized the danger of becoming sentimental.

"What make is your new car?" Bertie asked, as the prolix record of a sixty-mile drive was addressed to a table of inattentive faces.

"It's *not* the new one! I'm telling you!" Wharton

answered. "I shall have had her seven years next spring. Well, I'd not been up Marston Hill for an age. I stopped her dead at the bridge and put her at it. We went up on top."

His climax was received in gratifying silence. Then Beatrice murmured:

"It's wonderful."

"Not half bad, was it?" Wharton cried eagerly.

"Wonderful," Beatrice supplemented in a single breath, "that any grown-up human being in possession of his alleged faculties can take so much interest in his own dull goods and chattels."

Though the brutal rudeness brought a flush to Wharton's pendulous cheeks, it overshot its mark and produced a reaction of sympathy: for the rest of the meal he was encouraged to talk about himself; and, at the end, Isabel abandoned her idea of going to her room and allowed herself to be led away for an injured rehearsal of his grievances.

"I wonder people put up with her," he muttered indignantly as they walked out of earshot. "I know she's your cousin . . ."

"And you ought to know what to expect. We're all getting it in turn, but you got it worst . . . I suppose, because you're the greatest egotist. She can't allow a rival. Now, if you'd talked to her about *her* car . . ."

"I'm not interested in her car," Wharton answered simply; then, as he saw a smile hovering round Isabel's lips, he added hastily: "I'm not *wildly* interested in my own; one has to talk about something. Isabel . . . I suppose you can guess why I'm here, why I *let* Beatrice insult me?"

"*Don't* say you came to see me!"

"I was . . . awfully upset, when we met in Scotland. You were unlike yourself, on edge." . . .

"Everybody was," she interrupted. "I don't think the Keithleys at all like the idea of Jack's leaving the army."

"I was afraid you might be in trouble. . . . I half hoped you were, . . . so that I could help you. At present, you won't let me do anything for you; I mayn't even have the privilege of taking you to a theatre." . . .

"You're sure you do regard it as a privilege?" Isabel asked, with her eyes set keenly on his. "Not as . . . an investment?"

"Have I asked for any return?"

Isabel laughed a little scornfully to herself. If he had been disinterested in a single act, he would have been furious at the gibe that he was trying to bribe her as he had bribed every other woman who had come into his life. His misunderstood, patient magnanimity was unconvincing.

"Do you expect any?" she asked sharply. "If you hope to see any change in me, you're really bargaining; and there are no fair bargains between rich and poor. I can't afford to put myself under any more obligations to any one."

"You don't trust me?"

"Not while you continue to say you're in love with me."

"I shall always *be* in love with you, whether I say it or not."

The well-fed voice and plump face were indefinably stale; and Isabel felt that the very words of his protestation had been used before.

"Then . . ." She sank wearily on the grass and

leant against a tree. "Then I really think we'd better not go on meeting. I get no pleasure from being asked and asked for something I can't give. I like you, but I really tremble if I hear you're going to be in the same house-party. Now, the moment you heard I was coming to Marston . . ."

"I asked Beatrice. You're quite right! I didn't mind making a fool of myself. . . . However, you'll have no cause for '*trembling*' again."

At the rancorous quaver in his voice, Isabel found her own changing:

"If you'd stayed away, we might at least have parted friends."

As he walked back to the house alone, she heard herself being called for tennis. Ten minutes later, as she bored aimlessly through the beech-woods at the back of the house, a long car, shining like silver, shot down the drive; the engines hummed like a single drowsy bee; and, before she realized that Wharton had started, he was out of sight, perhaps out of her life.

The flashing, opulent car symbolized his attitude to her and his own place in her scheme. She had driven with him a score of times; and he always seemed to flaunt these cars in her face to mark their difference of standards and to hint at his own reserves of power. "*A good old bus,*" he had so often described this one; "*but wait until my new one's delivered!*" And, with every desire to uncover and love some nobler strain in him, Isabel could only see a good-natured, tiresome man who was grateful when a well-dressed woman drove with him.

Though she was sorry to say good-bye, it was better to end before she could charge her conscience with

exploiting him; but she had not so many friends that she could throw one away. A ghostly hoot, borne through the rustling leaves, seemed to tell her that it was good-bye in earnest this time; and she felt empty with loneliness. A friend gone . . . and another year going. . . . Into the virgin recesses of the beech-woods she was pursued by a truculent voice, demanding her presence for tennis. . . .

Isabel walked through gradually thinning trees to a knoll overlooking the high-road. Cars and bicycles raced by, the eager faces of their owners devouring life as the whirling wheels devoured the road. It was a perfect day of late summer; they were in holiday mood; and to these little people who flashed by below her, pressed so close together, it must have seemed a perfect world.

CHAPTER FIVE

STRAIGHT TALKING

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four, which I know not. . . ."

—PROVERBS XXX, 18.

ON Monday morning, when the car came to bear the Marston party to the station, Isabel descended with the news that her cousin was still in bed.

"I'm to say good-bye to you for her," she added, her lips twitching in an involuntary smile at the adroitness of an old warrior; "and she hopes you'll invite yourselves again quite soon."

A low, pent explosion broke out at the cool cynicism of the invitation.

"Seeing that she badgered us to come . . ." began Bertie.

"She told me she didn't want me; and, by God, she shewed it," Leslie muttered with accumulated bitterness.

"I must come to collect my dues," explained Bagshot, with an anxious glance at the bridge-book. "She owes me three, seven, nearly ten pounds!"

"I wouldn't come here again for twice the money," said Bertie. "She's had a scene with every one of us, jointly and severally; it's been the most hideous week-end of my experience; and now, when I was looking forward to a little straight talk for the good of her soul, she goes to ground."

"If you tell her you want another scene, I'm sure she'll oblige," Isabel put in wearily.

The arrival of the butler checked the flow of Bertie's criticism; and, as they drove to the station, he reproached himself for having spoken so intemperately. Though they had all been subjected to insufferable rudeness, he and Reggie at least were under no obligation to endure it a second time; for Isabel it was less easy to escape; for Leslie, so long as he aspired to marry Beatrice, it was impossible.

"Forgive me, old man, if I . . . blew off steam a bit too much," he murmured, as Leslie strolled dejectedly by his side on the platform.

"You only said what we all felt. I don't know what the matter was with Beatrice. . . . And I wish you or some one *had* talked to her straight. I can't, obviously."

"I'll talk straight to you, instead. You'll *have* to take her in hand a bit if you're going through with this."

"If I say a word, she threatens to break off the engagement."

"She admits you *are* engaged? Why don't you announce it?"

Leslie shrugged his shoulders with the weariness of a weak man defending a cause in which he does not believe:

"She says she wants to wait two years from Curtis' death."

"And, knowing what we do, you and I aren't much impressed by that. If I'm talking to you straight, Leslie,—I won't discuss whether you're wise to *think* of marrying her; that's hardly in your control—I recommend you to announce the engagement and

marry her at once. She's bullying you at present; and, if you're not careful, she'll keep you hanging about like the rest of her adorers until the day when she says she's not going to marry you after all."

"She's going to marry me all right," Leslie answered with the first sign of assurance he had shewn. "I'm not afraid of that. But I wish I knew why she was so difficult to handle nowadays. It's . . . getting on my nerves."

If he had felt disposed to offer more outspoken advice, Bertie's opportunity was cut short by the whistle of the London train. While Leslie and Reggie fought for places in a smoking-compartment, he found an empty carriage for Isabel and renewed the indulgence of "straight talking" by passing their uneasy week-end in review.

"Are *you* going to say 'It's the last time I go there'?" she asked, with faint scorn for the vacillation of men who allowed themselves to be alternately cajoled and terrorized by a capricious woman.

"I mean it. After all, I went there because I thought she wanted to be friends and I couldn't fail poor old Leslie. When you're neglected one moment and insulted the next . . . What was the matter with her?"

"I think . . . she wants . . . to break things off with Leslie . . . without letting him go," Isabel answered slowly. "That's never an easy thing to do; and if she ever cared for him . . . as I suppose she must have . . . I'm beginning to understand Beatrice better than I did. She's . . . ambitious. Did you happen to see the visitor's book?"

Bertie contented himself with a nod till she should explain whether she was referring generally to the dis-

tinguished names that graced the last few pages or to one name that recurred three and four times to every page.

"Are you thinking of any one in particular?" he asked.

"I shall be . . . very much surprised . . . if she marries Leslie," answered Isabel. "I don't know, I don't care. I shan't go to Marston again . . . for reasons of my own; it's not because of what she says to me—I've always been able to keep my end up with Beatrice and I've not the least fear of failing now. I . . . just don't like the atmosphere of the place. Until a short time ago I took people at face-value and never suspected anything below the surface; now I've had my eyes opened and I think the world's a *loathsome* place. Greedy, selfish, intriguing, immoral. . . . I *was* thinking of some one in particular, but it seemed too fantastic."

"You mean Edgbaston?"

"Yes . . . though I've no *grounds* for suspecting anything."

Recalling the frequency with which this name appeared, Bertie probed his memory for a face and a history to attach to it. For three or four years Lord Edgbaston had been more discussed than seen. The third son of a political peer, he had been driven at an early age into the engineering works on which the family wealth was founded; by the death of one brother from illness and of the other from wounds, young Edgbaston discovered himself at thirty the possessor of a fortune which rumour put at four millions. A later rumour stated that his capital had been doubled by the war; but, before the armistice, the new heir disposed of his interest and kept his assets liquid till

the labour troubles and trade depression of peace should have passed away or become so acute that he could buy back his own shares at the bottom of the market. Set free at least temporarily from the ties of commerce, he was now working to bring his personal value to a premium. Conspicuous acts of public generosity were rewarded by a viscounty; and, though he continued to live for the most part in the midlands, all England became very familiar with the name of a man who was credited with every reported act of anonymous liberality. By subsidizing a theatre for classic English plays at popular prices, he won the respect of cultured London; by saving the Cleckheaton Gainsborough for the National Gallery, he endeared himself to thousands who had never heard of it before. Very soon he was reported to be controlling newspapers, contributing to a party chest and winning himself a place among the giants of international finance. As he was unknown by sight to nine-tenths of those who discussed him, few could contradict the assertion that he was the unknown purchaser of Weybridge House or that his racing personality was veiled under the name of "Mr. Henry"; but, after three years of subterranean working, a wide-spread and flattering clamour arose that Lord Edgbaston should come into the open.

"I've always heard he's a common little beast," said Bertie. "I should have thought Beatrice had enough money to do without him."

"She has enough for everything except the biggest *coups* of all. If she could give shooting-parties and entertain royalty . . . Beatrice only cares about the big things. I suppose, after the mess she made of her life with Curtis . . ."

Though the sentence was left unfinished, Bertie could guess its ending from the wistful shadow that suddenly darkened Isabel's eyes: Beatrice was making ambition a substitute for happiness; Isabel only neglected to seek a substitute because she refused to despair of happiness. His next "straight talk," Bertie decided, would be with Master Jack Keithley.

On leaving his office that evening, he walked to Piccadilly and left a message for Jack to meet him at his club on urgent business. Midnight was past, he had outstayed the last of his friends and exhausted the latest of the evening papers before the truant arrived. His tweed suit imparted a holiday air to the dismal corner in which Bertie had established himself for greater privacy; and his fresh colour was a reproach to the asphyxiating, smoke-laden room.

"Hope you've not been waiting long!" he cried with complete absence of embarrassment. "I've just come back from the country. Is anything the matter?"

"Where have you been?" Bertie demanded with an affectation of sternness that quickly broke down before Jack's manner of effervescent well-being.

"Henley. I told you about my little car? I dined there."

"All by your little self?"

"No." . . .

Bertie shook his head ruefully:

"You arouse my worst suspicions. This lack of candour in one usually so frank, this mysterious pre-occupation, this unaccountable way of life . . ."

"I haven't the least idea what you're driving at."

"Oh, come! Who is she?"

"No one you're likely to have met."

"That we shan't know till you tell me her name."

"And for various reasons I'm not prepared to do that now. . . . If she *had* met you, Bertie, it would have made such an impression on her that I'm sure she'd have told me. . . . What's your 'urgent business'?"

"Why, just this." . . . As Jack's expression hardened to obstinacy, Bertie's voice became persuasive with the appeal of twenty years' friendship. "I want you to be absolutely serious for a moment. I'm not going to butt into your private affairs, but I must tell you that . . . several people have noticed a change in you lately. Your parents, particularly. Being the only son, you must expect them to fuss over you a bit more than if you were one of six, like me. They're rather worried, Jack; it distresses them to be left out of your confidence; and it hurt them like sin when you bolted from Invercaldy after about a day and a half of their company."

"I warned them that I might not be able to get there at all," Jack answered unamiably. "They can't expect me to spend *every* moment of my time there. And I should have thought, instead of grouching, they might have seen I was making rather an effort to oblige them." . . .

"I don't want to go into that. They *are* worried, and I should like to give them a reassurance of some kind. You're not in any sort of difficulty, are you, Jack?"

"Absolutely none."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Is that all the fun? If I'd known it was only that . . ."

"That's the chief part of it: you're upsetting Lady K. In addition, for what it's worth, you're not exactly

bursting yourself for people who may think they have some sort of claim on you. Why won't you dine on Wednesday? I've been trying to get hold of you for a fortnight. Why wouldn't you come to Marston? Heaven knows, you didn't miss much; but you promised to come and we were all expecting you—Reggie, Isabel, Leslie. I tell you again I don't want to butt in, but I care for you enough"—a dread of the theatrical caused Bertie to lighten his note—"to have a *norrid* feeling that you're shy of coming into the limelight with this young person you've picked up."

There was no answer until Jack had broken four matches in trying to light his cigarette.

"If I were you, I wouldn't use that phrase again, old man," he advised.

"I didn't mean it offensively."

"Well for you. Look here, I've managed to keep my temper, haven't I? Well, I understand all about the only-son business; if I didn't, I should strike against being treated as a child. Bless their hearts, if it's any consolation to my people, you can say I've never done anything in my life that I'd mind proclaiming from the Nelson Column. But I can't stand being watched and questioned. I've a right to some privacy. And I've taken from you what I wouldn't take from another man, Bertie."

"You talk like a strong, misunderstood man at the St. James' in old days," Bertie commented, as they walked downstairs together.

"Oh, you can rag me as much as you like. And it's decent of you to bother about me. But . . . I'm old enough to look after myself, whatever my poor, distressed parents may think. . . . Tell me about Mar-

ston. I hear Edgbaston is divorcing his wife to marry Beatrice. Is there any truth in it?"

"I didn't even know he had a wife," Bertie answered.

His ignorance was not allowed to remain long undisturbed. The following day he heard from a friend in the city that Leslie Cornwallis was going abroad immediately; Reggie Bagshot added a dramatic tale of charges, recriminations, entreaties and threats of suicide hurtling between Marston Park and London; and an inspired paragraph in one paper informed its readers that there was no truth in the rumour that the well-known golf-player, Major Leslie Cornwallis, was shortly to be married.

When Isabel came to dine the next night, she was able to confirm most of the facts alleged and to supply an explanation of the causes. Lady Edgbaston belonged to a period of her husband's career when two lives stood between him and the title, when he expected to spend his days in the shops and offices of the midlands and while he still despised people who wasted their energies in trying to achieve social success. She was the pretty and rather narrow daughter of a retired soldier; and the marriage was regarded by her friends as a disappointing surrender. Later, as the name of Edgbaston became invested with new awe, she was envied for her good-fortune; later still, she heard whispers that she was a drag on her husband's progress. With little of his adaptability and none of his determination, she drifted in bewilderment through the new worlds which he threw open to her. When the demand for munitions urged provincial manufacturers to London, she saw her rivals consolidating their positions in shorter time; when business merged in politics, she was slower than they to learn the

combinations and language of the new game; and, after a dozen slights and one public humiliation, she retired from a social competition where no one seemed to want or to understand her.

"That's why so few people ever meet *him*," Isabel added. "At the end of the war he used to say that she didn't like London. There were always plenty of women to run his parties for him. But that was only a make-shift."

"When did Beatrice come on the scene?" asked Bertie.

"A month before he bought Weybridge House. She forced him into it. I ought to have guessed then, but she was always about with Leslie. I suppose he was a stalking-horse."

"But you say she's got rid of him now?"

Isabel nodded, hardly able herself to understand how any woman could make a man her lover one day and break with him for ever on the morrow. It was no business of hers; now that she knew what Beatrice and Leslie were like, she never wanted to see either again or to enter again the poisoned atmosphere of Marston Park. Beatrice might work her will on Lord Edgbaston or on a dozen others so long as she did not provoke a quarrel. Then, if need be, she would have to be reminded of some one who could cut short her latest schemes with a single hint.

"I've no doubt she'd have liked to keep him, but when he insisted that the engagement should be announced . . ."

Bertie smiled wanly at the thin echo of his own "straight talk" with Leslie. It had been handed on without loss of time; and poor Leslie would for long be too sore to realize what he had escaped. In his

retirement he would hear of Lady Edgbaston, if not of her husband; hear more and more of her as a current of opinion was set in motion against her: "*They don't get on very well. . . . She's rather a difficult woman. . . . An impossible woman. . . . Poor Jack Edgbaston behaved like a saint; but, when she went off with this other man, he had to divorce her.*" . . . After that, Leslie would hear nothing of Mrs. Anker or of Lord Edgbaston for several months. Then they would be seen together; a new current of opinion would be set moving in their favour; they would be married very quietly; and Leslie would read of their swelling tide of success as the impatient mob burst hungrily through the newly opened doors of Weybridge House. Of the first Lady Edgbaston nothing would ever be heard forty-eight hours after her divorce.

"How far has Beatrice got with the other fellow?" asked Bertie.

"Oh, she's being terribly discreet! But she's shewn him how she can help him. And a woman from their part of Warwickshire told me to-day that there was rather a scandal about the way Lady Edgbaston went everywhere with his young secretary: it was foolish, criminal to throw them together like that. I suppose it's only a question of time now."

"It may be criminal, but it's hardly foolish."

Under the heavy crown of auburn hair, Isabel's pale face darkened:

"I'm not sure that the real criminals aren't the people who tolerate these things. Bertie, is it the war, is it because so many people have no religion? I was brought up to think that I couldn't *meet* people who'd been divorced."

"You must remember you were brought up by Lady Keithley," he laughed.

For a moment Isabel contrasted the unbending Puritanism of Invercaldy with the furtive laxity of Marston. Her week-end had aged her; and, for the present, she could only see life through the medium of that terrible detective's report. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were equally vile: they fought for their own hands, they made enjoyment their single aim.

"But I think she's right! There *are* rules. You think you're very broad-minded, Bertie, but you wouldn't *defend* the people who break them. Yet you won't punish them."

"Because punishment has nothing to do with morals. It doesn't deter the people who mean to go off the rails; and it comes too late for the people who've broken the rules. One of my greatest friends is . . . an unconventional young woman who broke one very big rule; she didn't injure anybody but herself and she's paid a terrible penalty. Would you . . . punish her?"

"In every way I could!" Isabel answered with the ruthlessness of fanaticism. "Why should any one trouble to keep rules if you're not punished for breaking them?"

"I hoped virtue was its own reward," Bertie laughed, as he sought a less dangerous channel for their conversation.

Calling at his club on the way home, he wrote colourlessly to Lady Keithley that he had seen Jack and that there was no reasonable ground for uneasiness.

"He's really never had a holiday since he came down

from Cambridge," he explained. "First India, then France; then with the army of occupation and now at the Staff College. He was getting to feel rather stale and he's now having a complete change. I had a straight talk with him; and you need have no fear that he's in any kind of trouble." . . .

"And, after this, I think I'll give straight talking a rest. It's done no good with Leslie, no good with Isabel and precious little good with Jack. I wish I didn't always imagine that I could run other people's lives for them. I've not made such a wild success of my own."

As he sealed the letter, Bertie turned at the sound of an opening door and was surprised to see Jack crossing the room to him with a smile of boyish embarrassment.

"I thought I might find you here. I've come to apologize."

"For not dining with me?" Bertie asked.

"No. . . . I've been thinking over what you said last night. It was . . . decent of you to bother; and I'm afraid I was rather ungracious. Some time quite soon I hope to explain everything." . . .

"My dear Jack, I don't need any explanations! If you ever think I can help you . . . I'll tell you one thing for the good of your soul: I presume you've fallen in love with somebody, I presume she's all right, I presume—at least I *hope*—everything's running without a hitch. Naturally enough, you don't want to say anything till the business is fixed up; my only advice is, don't wait too long. This is beginning to get on your nerves, if I'm not much mistaken. You're a pretty placid creature as a rule, but for the last month or so you've been ready to bite any one who came

within reach. For the rest of us, that's all in the day's work with people in your condition; but, if you don't ease the pressure, you may turn and bite . . . shall I say, your romance? And then there'll be the deuce to pay. I've no doubt you think you're enjoying yourself, but you're playing with fire. And there's not the least reason why you of all people should wait another day."

Jack had an answer ready; but, with a sudden change of purpose, he left it undelivered.

"D'you care to stroll round to Piccadilly?" he asked. "You've not seen my new rooms yet. I think you'll like them, though the decoration's been held over till I go back to Camberley."

"And when will that be?"

"To-morrow," Jack answered abruptly.

"And a good thing too," Bertie commented in the same measure.

On that word, they set out in silence and traversed the length of Pall Mall and St. James' Street without exploring a position which their artless hints and reticences had now made clear. Jack, though he curveted away from a frank confession, was yearning for a confidant to applaud and encourage him; as surely as if he had announced it, he was going to take his great decision within the next twenty-four hours; and his conscience was disturbed by the thought that he was leaving his friends in the dark.

"Some time quite soon . . ." Jack began again.

"You'll have to . . . prepare your people a bit," Bertie suggested.

He would have liked to add that there were others, notably Isabel, who should be prepared; but for the

moment he could think of no formula that would leave her sensitive pride unhurt.

"Of course. . . . I hope they don't feel I've been a brute, Bertie: I couldn't say anything till there was something definite to go on. There's nothing definite yet. . . . Women are strange creatures."

"If I can help . . ." Bertie began.

"I don't know that you can. . . . It's been a most extraordinary business: I really *do* believe it was a case of love at first sight."

"On both sides? Then why are you waiting?"

"She's . . . diffident. Everything's so perfect now that she's afraid to disturb it."

"Afraid your people wouldn't approve?"

"I don't think so."

"*Would* they? Remember you're what is called a *parti*."

"That be damned. She's the most unworldly girl I've ever met. . . . No, I don't know *why* she hangs back. And my people would love her."

"Well, if you're certain she loves you, don't let her hang back any longer. If you do, I warn you, Jack, you'll snap."

A moment later Bertie was being conducted round the new rooms while Jack explained his scheme of furnishing and decoration. Catalogues and pattern-books were piled on tables and chairs; the hall was filled with crates; and the air was heavy with the smell of straw and sacking.

"Are you going to live here when you're married?" Bertie enquired as the inspection came to an end.

"One might do worse," Jack answered, as he mixed himself a drink and glanced at his letters. For the most part they seemed to consist of circulars; but one

envelope, addressed in pencil and unstamped, caused him to wrinkle his forehead in surprise. Excusing himself, he opened it and read the contents, with his face turned away from his friend:

"Darling Jack, I'm terribly afraid it's quite impossible for us to meet to-morrow, as we arranged. I shan't see you again before you go up; indeed, I don't know when I shall see you, so this is just to thank you and say good-bye. (Do you go 'up' to Camberley, as if it were Oxford or Cambridge? And do you have 'terms' there? You've never told me anything about what you do there!) Whatever you do, wherever you are, this brings with it the best wishes in all the world.

"I've decided to go to Cairo after all; there was another letter waiting for me from Lady Henson, and I don't feel justified in refusing. I don't know how long I shall be away; but, if you've left the Staff College before I come back, remember your promise, Jack dear. You must stay on in the army; you're much too young to have nothing to do; and, if you like, you have a great career before you. Wherever you're sent, I shall watch your career as though I were by your side.

"And now accept all my thanks for the radiant sunshine you've brought into my life at every hour of the day since I first came to lunch with you (when you were so shy that you never noticed I was far more shy!). May God bless you and reward you as you deserve.

"Joan."

The letter read, Jack slipped it into his pocket and looked at the clock.

"Excuse me one minute while I telephone," he begged.

"I must go home to bed," Bertie answered.

"It's early yet," Jack called back from the door.

Five minutes later he returned to say that he could get no reply. Bertie noticed that his face was white and his hands trembling.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked. "Anything I can do?"

"Nothing to-night, thanks," Jack answered, with a look of despair at the clock.

CHAPTER SIX

AN EMPTY TRIANON

If you refuse me once, and think again,
I will complain.
You are deceiv'd, love is no work of art,
It must be got and born,
Not made and worn,
By every one that hath a heart. . . .
—SIR JOHN SUCKLING: *Song*.

AS soon as he was dressed next day, Jack hurried round to Old Burlington Street. Throughout the night, as he turned from side to side or sprang up to pace the length of his flat from the balcony overlooking Piccadilly to the windows of his own bedroom, he had flogged his fears with appeals to reason. Joan could not be seriously ill, or she would have told him; and, if she was not ill, she had no excuse for defaulting. If one of her relations were ill, she had not allowed the news to distress her at dinner; if the news had come later, she gained nothing by making a mystery of it. No one was ill, no one was in trouble; but, when he had set his heart on this last meeting, it was intolerable to be robbed of it, without explanation, in a letter containing no single hint that Joan ever wished to see him again. The omission seemed brutally deliberate.

While he waited for the street door to be opened, Jack was assailed by terror that she might already

have left London. But why? Of all moments why should she choose this, when he had gently lulled her fears, gently won her love, brought her happiness of a kind that made him gulp and stammer when her eyes softened at sight of him. To-day—as he had almost confessed to Bertie Millbank, because every man needed a confidant—he purposed to charm or drag her over her last diffidence. If she had foreseen that, if she had run away. . . .

Among all the people that he had met in all the books that he had read, Jack could not remember man or woman who loved and refused to marry unless there was a sinister obstacle. He pulled at the bell, this time violently; and a tousled woman, defiling the air of early morning with her stuffy clothes and greasy plaits, let down a chain and informed him that Miss Prendergast was believed to be still in her rooms.

“But she’s not to be called till she rings,” added the landlady, with a vindictive glance at a crumpled envelope-back. “If you’d like to leave a message . . .”

Finding no suitable answer, Jack pressed into the hall and walked upstairs without one. Pausing by Joan’s sitting-room, he tapped at random on the first of three doors. A startled voice cried: “Yes?” He called her name, but now there was silence.

“Joanie! . . . Joanie, it’s me. . . . I came to see what was up. That letter of yours . . . Darling, you’re not ill, are you? . . . I *must* see you!”

“I can’t see *any one!*” The voice was tremulous with misery. “I *said* no one was to come up.”

“I’m afraid it’s not so easy to keep me away. I’ll clear out as soon as I know what the trouble is.”

“It’s nothing. . . . I mean, there’s nothing you can do.”

"We'll see about that. May I come in?"

"No, Jack! Please!"

Before he had time to realize that she was moving, the key grated in the lock; and he heard the faint patter of retreating bare feet.

"I propose to see you, Joan," he announced with equal firmness of voice and uncertainty of method.

"You can't! Oh, Jack, it's not like you to bully me!"

"Hitherto it's not been necessary. Joanie, I'll give you two minutes to shove some clothes on and open the door." . . . He interrupted himself to listen as a creak of castors indicated that a barricade was being erected. "Oh no, my dear, I can't allow that! Stand clear, or I may hurt you. There's more than one way of opening a door."

His shoulder struck the upper panels with a force that seemed to make the landing tremble; a mist of honey-coloured dust rose to meet the sun; and light glinted under the lintel.

"Oh, Jack, don't break it! I'll let you in. On my honour! Just give me time to put on a dressing-gown. . . ."

A moment later he entered to find Joan bare-foot like a penitent, in a white wrap, with her short hair standing out from her head in an aureole. Tears clustered like diamonds on her eyelashes; and her cheeks were wet and pale with weeping.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry," he whispered. "You left me no alternative. Come into the next room and tell me I may ring for some breakfast."

Joan gazed at him without speaking, as though she were trying to recognize under the disguise of obstinacy and violence the easy-going companion who, to her

delight, had shared half her tastes and responded to her nonsensical sallies with outbursts of equal nonsense:

"I don't want any breakfast."

"You will when you see me getting my teeth into it."

"Haven't you had any?"

"Not yet. My child, your letter was hardly an appetizer. If you were ill . . ."

"I never said I was."

"Nor did you say why it was impossible for us to meet to-day as we'd arranged." . . . He paused to order breakfast from a landlady who had not yet recovered from the surprise of his entry. "If I didn't come at once, I was afraid you might have bolted."

"I should have."

He looked up to find Joan with her back to the wall, breathing quickly and glancing from side to side like an animal awaiting its chance of escape:

"Darling, I should have thought we were old enough friends for you to tell me what the trouble's about." As he tried to take her hand, she whipped it behind her back; and Jack felt his face flushing with an anger which he had never felt before her insane shifts and changes began to make havoc of his nerves. "I can't insist, obviously," he continued stiffly. "But, as a little bit of courtesy to the meanest of God's creatures, when you've promised to keep an appointment, you might say why you can't keep it."

Silence fell between them until the breakfast-tray appeared and he led her to a chair.

"I was frightened," Joan whispered, with bowed head.

"Of me? But, so far as I remember, I behaved

like a perfect gentleman yesterday. I didn't knock any doors down." . . .

"I thought you were going to spoil everything; and I couldn't bear that. You've been so sweet. . . . If I'd thought you could keep it up . . . But I could see I was making you suffer." . . .

"Everybody's been complaining of my temper," Jack interrupted cheerfully; "but I always feel particularly amiable while I'm with you."

"You've been a darling! But I've let you get into an impossible position."

"I don't see it myself."

"Are you ready to let things go on *exactly* as they are?"

"For ever?" Jack left his breakfast unfinished and walked to the window. "No, I'm not. That day in the New Forest, I said to myself I wouldn't badger you . . ."

"And last night . . . ?" Her question cut through the silken complacency of his tone.

"I never said anything," he answered with conscious rectitude.

"You would have . . . to-day."

Had he wished to deny the charge, her ringing certainty of tone made it impossible. Turning to her he tried again to take her hand. This time his sudden humility compelled her to allow him.

"Joanie, can't we clear things up? We needn't . . . skirmish," he faltered. "You like me; and you know I love you. I want you to marry me. You've been unhappy, and I want to make you happy again. I shan't hurry you. I'm keeping a pretty fair curb on myself: when we say good-night, I only kiss your hand. . . . But I want to know where I am."

"I can't marry you, Jack. . . . Oh, why do you make me say it again?"

"Because I want to understand. I fancied you were reasonably fond of me." . . .

Before he saw her move, Jack found Joan's arms clasped about his neck and her lips trembling against his cheek.

"You know I am! I can never repay you! Until you came, I was dead, dead . . . and you've brought me to life. I'll do anything for you, anything but that. You can take me and throw me aside when you're tired of me . . ."

"Darling child, I don't think you *quite* know what you're saying!"

"It's so little! . . . I can't bear to lose you, Jack; and I shall have to . . . now that I'm making you unhappy. Oh, my dear, I can see it! Even in this short time. And it will get worse and worse until your love turns to fretfulness and you begin to hate me. If you can't let things go on as they were, I must let you go . . . now."

"You have not *yet* explained . . ."

"Why I can't marry you? What shall I say? I love you so much that I must give you everything. And I can't. I'm not worthy of you, Jack. I know myself, I know what you'd expect of me. And I should disappoint you so much that I should spoil your life. Every word you say, your attitude towards everything shews me I'm right . . . I wanted to drop quietly out of your life, but you wouldn't let me. Oh, why won't you believe me?"

"Because you're talking such nonsense!"

"It's all true!"

As she drooped against him, Jack put an arm round

her shoulders and led her back to the table. Her fever was beginning to infect him; and the memory of her first kiss took possession of his mind whenever he looked down at her. Hitherto they had been able to meet without embarrassment because the door of their friendship was barred against passion; henceforward he must always think of Joan as a woman, mysterious, elusive and intoxicating, with soft white arms and fragrant hair, warm lips and a throbbing, slender body that melted in his embrace as she clung to him.

"You gave me a sort of promise that you *wouldn't* go to Egypt," he murmured.

"That was before . . . No, I'm *not* going to make excuses! It *was* a promise; and I changed my mind. I'm a woman. . . . If you drive me into a corner . . ."

"Do you *want* to go?"

"I shall hate it."

"I should hate you to go. I should see nothing of you for six months! And my flat would never be furnished."

"I'd not forgotten *that!*"

If he had charged her with abandoning a young child, she could not have been more horrified.

"I'm sure you hadn't. . . . Joanie, you'd much better stay in England. And when you're once more yourself and have outgrown this distressing habit of thinking you're unworthy of people . . ."

"No, Jack! If we're to meet, you must give me your word of honour that you'll never talk about this again. . . ."

"With the utmost desire to oblige you in every way . . ."

"I mean it!"

"I, too." Jack found to his surprise that his tone of banter had slipped beyond recall and that his temper was cracking under the pressure of Joan's wrong-headed obstinacy. For a moment he wanted to overwhelm her, as he had done when he began to break down the door; tenderness surged into his heart as he remembered her undried tears and white cheeks; exasperation croaked and croaked again the question why he wasted his time on her. "I've not the faintest idea what's going on in your head, but we don't seem to be getting any forrarder. If you don't want me to talk about this again, I won't; but I can't meet you without talking about it. By a simple calculation . . ."

"I shan't see you any more. . . . Perhaps that's best."

Though there seemed nothing to add, neither could make the first move; and Jack stood with his hands in his pockets staring at the floor; while Joan watched him fascinated. When he made up his mind to go, she would lose him as she had lost Curtis; once again she would matter to no one, there would be no one to accept the love which Jack had brought to life again. She must expect to be alone now as long as she was doomed to live.

"I must see about packing a few things," Jack muttered.

Through a film of tears, his figure advanced menacing and distorted. A hand extended itself; and, as she caught it between her own, Joan fell forward on her knees:

"I want to say 'Yes,' but I should spoil your life!"

"My dear, when you say things like that, I can't argue with you."

"Then . . . you're giving me up?"

As on the day when he first moved under fire, Jack felt all the blood in his body mounting to his head: nothing was too desperate for him, and yet he had to make a shew of self-control.

"It doesn't rest with me," he answered, with fierce exultation that his cold anger made her wince. "I swear to you now, in the sight of God, by everything you hold sacred, I shan't marry any one else so long as you're alive!"

Joan drew herself up with startled, uncomprehending eyes:

"You mustn't do that! It's wicked! You're making *me* responsible!"

"No. . . . I'm just telling you what I propose to do. You're a free agent. I'm not blaming you. It's my own silly fault for falling in love with you. . . . Now I'll say good-bye."

"Where are you going to?"

"My rooms, first of all. To Camberley this afternoon. If you ever want me, . . . you'll know where to find me." . . .

To Joan, huddled tearless in an arm-chair, the long morning was a time in which Jack must surely repent. The longer afternoon dragged its way to the moment when it was too late for him to come. The door, indeed, was locked; but he could have forced it. And, in the slow-falling twilight, she realized that she would have yielded if he had again asked her to marry him. For his sake she did not want to yield, for her own she yearned to be compelled. She wished him to be masterful and, at the same time, gentle; to accept her terms and to stand out for his own; to give her up and to stay with her, simultaneously.

A clock struck seven; and she knew that he must be nearly at Camberley by now.

"I'm glad," she told herself, as she sorted the patterns of chair-covers and curtains which they were to have reviewed together. "I suppose . . ."

To suppose that he would write next day was to hope that he would be weak when she prayed to find him strong. Once before, when Curtis and she measured their endurance against the torture of separation, she had prayed that they would both be strong enough to resist what had then seemed a temptation of the flesh. They had broken down; and, in joining herself to him, she had always felt that, while the flesh might be subdued, no one could repel an attack that assailed body, brain and spirit at the same moment. What had Curtis thought about it? He had known many women in his life; physical passion dominated him; and he only contemplated a union of spirits because he scrupled to accept the surrender of an inexperienced girl. Passion so dominated him that she could force him to accept her surrender: Curtis had been weak, and half her love was born of a desire to shield his weakness. Jack was strong . . . as she had herself been strong before love turned her from a raw child into a mature woman.

"A curb . . ."

He had said something about keeping a curb on himself, though she thought of him as a man armoured in romantic reverence for women. Had he been like other men of his age, she could have given herself to him and dropped out of his life, without regrets or reproaches, when passion was sated; on his side, no question of marriage; on hers, no pang of obligation undischarged. So long as he stood armoured against

even her kisses, he would never become, like Curtis, a man to be coaxed or conquered: the power which she needed to establish over him was for his own protection, half her love was born of a desire to shield him against his own romantic reverence; but, so long as he resisted her, he would claim more than she could give.

"If I could tell him everything . . ."

Joan glanced at the big pattern-book with eyes that saw only Jack's hardening of expression a week before, as they discussed the last rumour of Beatrice Anker's second marriage: his wife was to begin her life from the first meeting, Jack would rather forego all the understanding that she had learned from Curtis than realize that any other man had moulded her as wife or mistress. If the worst came to the worst, she would have to tell him everything; but, until imagination tempered his facile theorizing, she could not bear to think of her love's being explained away, by one who was too young to know passion, in the terms of those who were too old to remember it.

"He'd say Curtis had . . . *seduced* me! I could never explain. They wouldn't understand if I did, he and his people. . . . They'd expect me to repent . . . and pray to be forgiven."

When the next day, and then the next, brought no letter, Joan won a deceptive satisfaction from the thought that perhaps, after all, she would be spared the hopelessness of explaining what she could not make understood. For some weeks at least she was unlikely to meet Jack; and she did no good by rehearsing possible encounters. There was at hand a labour of love; and, in planning and supervising, she threw her heart and soul into the work of decorating his four

little rooms till she seemed to conjure him into the frame which she was designing as a memorial of their love.

So long as she could be useful to him, she still mattered. The toy palace, hidden under overhanging eaves and pressed between the massive homes of grotesque, material men, commemorated their moment of stolen, unexpected sunshine together; their moment of peace too sacred to be disturbed, before he tried to prolong his dreaming into daylight and after she had despaired of ever slumbering in peace or warming to the sun again. An Indian summer this last month had been, in a world of make-believe; they were masquerading in a golden, transforming light, and their Trianon was very heaven till he whispered of unmasking. Why must men always spoil the present by dragging in the future? To unmask was to end the carnival: the fairy prince became a prince regnant; and the silver domino who had loved and laughed with him must protest in confusion that she was unworthy of the honour he would shew her.

And when all had been made ready for him?

Joan worked whole-heartedly and apace, though each toiling hour that deadened thought dragged her forward to the moment when her labours would be ended. And then?

Postponed from day to day, the question changed its form and refused her further postponement:

"And now?"

Joan whispered the words to herself as she completed her final inspection and drifted helplessly to a writing-table. There were green and red quills: black, purple and brown sealing-wax. *He* would never remember confessing that, when he stayed in

houses where sealing-wax of many colours was provided, he always wanted to steal it; but she had silently stored up every hint of trivial whim and liking. The result was to be seen in every corner of every room; the very blind must know the love which she had lavished on him. She could do no more.

"And now?"

"I sent you a post-card at the beginning of the week to say that everything was nearly ready for you. Now I don't think there's a single thing more to be done; and I'm sending you a terrible bundle of bills (I've checked them by the estimates). Jack dear, I do hope you won't think I've been very extravagant. You didn't set any limit; and I wanted everything to be perfect. If there's anything you don't like, I'll work night and day to change it for you." . . .

She paused with a wistful hope that Jack might find innumerable things to alter so that she might prolong the knowledge that she was working for him. Having paused, she could not continue the letter.

"And now?"

One, two, three weeks had passed without her hearing a word from Camberley. At best, she could hope for a graceful letter of thanks and pray to be spared a cheque. If their intimacy was indeed over, it was something that she could give it decent burial without being paid for shewing this hundredth part of her love for him. When he realized that she was powerless to yield, he would be desolatingly unhappy, and her love could do nothing to comfort him. Her love, barred at every entrance from participating in his life, returned to her unwanted and ran to waste, as in

the days when Curtis was newly dead. If she could but marry Jack without telling him anything . . .

"As though I were . . . *ashamed?*" So short a time had passed since she begged Curtis to let the whole world into their secret! "If he had, Jack would never have spoken to me. I should have saved him all this. And I wonder where I should be now if I hadn't had this last month to shew me life was still worth living. . . . I wonder if it is worth living." . . .

If men would only let the future take care of itself! The present might have been so glorious! The present that began that night when she felt she was being watched, when she turned to find Jack standing wide-eyed and white-faced at her elbow . . . Joan sprang to her feet and clung to the table for support as she saw him, white-faced and wide-eyed as at their first meeting:

"My *dear*, you gave me such a shock! . . . Is anything the matter, Jack? You . . . oh, I thought it was your ghost!"

"I wouldn't have frightened you for the world, Joanie. . . . It gave *me* rather a shock to find you here."

"I was writing to you." . . . Her mouth became suddenly dry, and she pointed to the bundle of docketed bills. "You got my card?"

"I came up at once to inspect your handiwork. My dear, it's perfect! And finding you in the middle of it, as though you belonged to me with all the rest . . . I *am* glad to see you again!"

As though he were helping to recreate that first night Joan recognized the old, ingenuous throb of eagerness in his voice; the fair, clean-cut face was

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shining with vitality, and the grey eyes were dark with excitement.

"I've missed you terribly, Jack," she whispered. "I was afraid you were angry." . . .

"Sweetheart, I *couldn't* be angry with you; but I felt we'd got ourselves into rather a tangle . . ."

As one hand smoothed a tiny wrinkle of distress from her forehead, the other played with her hair, rediscovering its silken softness. She flushed with delight as he sternly scrutinized every feature and sighed with relief at finding her unchanged.

"Ah, don't let's talk about that to-night! I want to make the most of you. When have you to go back?"

"To-morrow. Are you free to dine and go to a show?"

"Oh, let's come back here and talk! There's ever so much I want to say, all stored up. It was so dreadful when you went away and I had no one to tell things to."

"Well, if you'll give up the Cairo business, you'll see all you want of me when I settle here. . . . Have you any idea where you'd like to dine?"

"A grill-room, *please!* We can't afford to waste time dressing. . . . When you came in, I was wondering if I should ever see you again. Have you been storing up things for me?"

"I wanted to tell you everything that happened. I couldn't write, because, for the life of me, I didn't know how we stood. . . . What is the position, Joanie?"

"That I'm ever so glad to have you back! And we're going to have a wonderful evening together. And I hope you're glad to see me."

As she led him from room to room, Jack felt his wrist pulsing from the eager pressure of her fingers; and, when he could watch her unobserved, he tried to find a key to her inexplicable moods. At their last meeting, Joan had seemed to be at her wits' end; he had come to London without warning because he wished to leave her unmolested until she sent for him. Now, when she welcomed him with one hand, only to repel him with the other, he felt himself drifting into a position wherein he would every day find greater difficulty in circumventing her masterly inactivity.

"I heard from my mother two days ago," he announced, as they went out to dinner. "She wanted to know what plans I had for Christmas. I was wondering if you'd come up to Invercaldy for a few days . . ."

"That's very sweet of you, Jack . . ."

"I want you to meet my people."

The significance of the phrasing was emphasized by his tone to shew that this invitation marked a diplomatic advance in their relationship.

"I've not settled anything at present," she answered. "May I let you know a little later?"

Jack nodded easily enough; but her voice, in its turn, warned him that she would not allow her pace to be forced. This veiled antagonism ruffled him to passing exasperation; but Joan's frank delight in being with him again brought with it a glowing memory of the first time they lunched together and of his own joy in discovering her. At every meeting he found new reason to love her gaiety and gentleness, her absurdity of idea and word, her power of enjoyment and her graciousness in thanking without wearying him with thanks. Most of all he loved her dependence on

him; but his sense of growing power left less room for patience.

"Let's go somewhere a bit quieter," he suggested abruptly at the end of dinner.

"I must go home soon. I've been so late the last few nights. . . . But we might sit in the lounge till you've finished your cigar."

"Why not go back to my rooms, as you suggested?"

"If you don't think it's too late?"

As he looked gravely at his watch, Joan despised herself for this false appeal to his chivalry. In thinking of his rooms, however, she remembered his phrase on finding her there, as though she belonged to him "with all the rest"!

"I don't want . . . to compromise you," Jack answered, as he motioned for his bill. "Perhaps you're right. May I come round to Old Burlington Street? I've been there much later than this; and your people there know me."

"No! I'll come to you. Dear heart, we needn't fence when we know so well what's going on in each other's heads! You won't spoil our evening, will you?"

"I'll try not to. I'm afraid . . . it'll probably . . . be the last we shall have together . . . for some time."

"Then don't let's waste the present by thinking about the future," Joan laughed; but she kept her head averted for fear of shewing him that his faint note of menace had already robbed their meeting of half its glory.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WEAKNESS OF STRENGTH

"In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy!"

—OSCAR WILDE: *Lady Windermere's Fan.*

WHEN next Jack came to London, he left those who were interested in his movements to discover his presence from their chosen newspaper. Under the heading *Regimental Dinners, Lowland Light Infantry*, Joan found the name of Captain J. Keithley, D.S.O. sandwiched between those of Major L. V. Cornwallis and Captain R. Bagshot, M.C.

"I never knew he had the D.S.O.," she confessed to *The Times*. "He wouldn't tell me; and I'd almost forgotten the Bagshot boy was in the same regiment. In fact, we both seem to shed all our relations and friends when we're together." . . .

Though she was her own sole audience, Joan realized that she was talking against time and refusing to admit a stab to the heart on learning that Jack had come to London, had stayed within three hundred yards of her, had gone back without a word or sign. . . . He was free to come and go, of course; and she had begged him to give her up. . . .

"When Curtis was killed, I didn't think any one could hurt me any more." . . .

Early in December the invitation to Invercaldy was

repeated by letter; and on Christmas Eve, which Joan spent in London by herself, she received a ruby-and-diamond bracelet with a card of good wishes. She did not see Jack, however, until the spring, when they met without premeditation at dinner with Mrs. Ferguson. He greeted her casually; but, before she went down, Joan received a note with the words: "*Urgent. Make an excuse to go home early. I'll offer to take you. You're looking most miserably ill. I want to talk. Bless you, child! J.*"

After reading it, she kept her eyes cast down for fear of shewing her neighbours that they were brimming with tears. Jack's familiar laugh and happy voice, the splendid terms on which he lived with all the world, mocked her with the vision of all that she had thrown away. For three months she had flung herself into any work that came to hand; for three months she had walked in desperation to the doorstep of Bertie Millbank, Fay Allport, Reggie Bagshot—any one who would give her companionship—only to walk away in the knowledge that no one could help her. If she looked ill, no one else cared for her enough to notice it; if any one else noticed it, no one but Jack troubled to send her an anxious little note.

The dinner dragged interminably. There was no exaggeration in pleading a headache when at last the men came into the drawing-room.

"And will you kindly explain what you've been doing to yourself?" Jack demanded, as they drove to Old Burlington Street.

"I don't follow. . . . I haven't been doing anything in particular."

"You've contrived to lose all your looks."

"A little word of encouragement like that is just the thing to bring them back," she laughed.

"Have you been overworking? Have you been in trouble of any kind?"

"No." . . .

When they reached their destination, Jack asked leave to come in with her.

"I'm working at the War Office now," he explained. "I'm also leading a life of wanton luxury, reckless dissipation, all that sort of thing. You've heard of people who are 'popular in society'? I'm one. If you find parties hanging fire, you'll know it's only because they're still waiting for me. You'll be surprised at the number of parties that are still waiting for me. The fact is, I can't stand being popular in society by myself; I want you to come and be popular with me."

"I don't feel I shall be really popular if I've lost all my looks," objected Joan, as she collected tumblers and cigarettes from the sideboard.

Catching her by the arm, Jack looked up with a smile that set her smiling in return:

"Perhaps that was rather an overstatement. You looked so white before dinner; and your eyes had lost all their colour. *Now . . .*"

"You've brought it all back in five minutes! Jack, I think that's the vainest thing I've heard on the lips of any human being."

"One of the joys of being with you is that I can be absolutely frank."

"Even about my personal appearance, which is the one thing that matters to me."

"And a thing that doesn't matter two pins to me so long as you're not ill or unhappy."

"I wonder how long you'd bother about me if I were disfigured," she mused.

"I wonder how long you'll take to realize that you always bring out the worst Mark Tapley elements in my character. Darling child, what *credit* is there in loving you as you are? It's like falling off a log. There's a *little* credit, perhaps, in staying away and not writing . . ."

His sentence was interrupted by a quick, frightened turn of her head:

"I was only *afraid* you were larning me to be a toad. I *hoped* . . ."

"Will you have one of your own cigarettes? . . . I was larning myself not to be a badger."

As he stood up to strike a match, Joan saw that his eyes were gleaming as she remembered them when she had laughed away his shyness at their first luncheon:

"That's the first bad joke I've heard for three months. . . . I was a party hanging fire because I was waiting for you. What d'you think of that?"

"Charming as a compliment, rotten as a joke. It's a crib on the bromidic hostess who said there was nothing like a little music to make a party go off. 'It's making *this* party go off,' replied a sulphitic guest as he dashed out of the house with some one else's hat. . . . Did I tell you I was glad to see you again?"

"Not in words. Of course, when your eyes regained all their colour, two hours and five minutes after seeing me. . . ."

"You guessed the reason? That is the . . . *truest* thing I've heard on the lips of any human being."

"Dear Jack!"

As her hand fell with a light pressure on his wrist, he raised it to his lips:

"Happy, child?"

"If only it could be always like this!"

"Now who's spoiling the present by dragging in the future?"

Joan shivered as though he had startled her out of sleep:

"You make me feel such a criminal, Jack. Child. . . . You're fond of calling me that, but *you're* the real child. Oh, I may be seven years younger, and you may be terribly clever; but you know *nothing* of life. It would be all right if we could go on for ever like this." . . .

"Am I asking you to change it?"

"You will."

"Let's wait till that day comes."

"And, meantime, you'll go away again. . . . Oh, Jack, I *swear* I didn't mean that! At least. . . . I didn't mean to say it. . . . It's been *hell* without you!"

Capturing her other hand, he drew her to the arm of his chair:

"Why didn't you send for me? I should have . . . loved and honoured you for it."

"The only way I could shew my love was . . . to leave you alone. That's all I can do now. . . . Darling, I don't think we'll go and be 'popular in society' together. After all, I've . . . stuck it out for three months . . . and I'm still alive. If we're happy now, it'll be so much worse afterwards. I *did* warn you . . . at the very first sight of danger; but I sometimes think you forgot. . . . You'd never *say* it, but if you even thought: 'She's let me down.' " . . .

"You wouldn't."

"And you think you know something about life! Oh, Jack, what would I not give to be in your world!

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Everybody's honourable, there, and truthful and generous and chivalrous, . . . a glorified public-school; and all the horrid things are just 'not done'; and all the horrid people are sort of escaped convicts. Your world contains none of the people who find that the public-school standard doesn't fit their case; none of the women who have lovers or the men who go off with other people's wives. . . . You wouldn't meet people like that?"

"Society's so jolly mixed that I'm meeting 'em every day! To-morrow as ever is, I'm being lured into dining with Beatrice Anker and that fellow Edgbaston. What I feel is: it's *their* business; and we must let people lead their own lives so long as they're quite clearly not injuring the commonwealth."

Though she strove to maintain the hypothetical note, Joan found herself stiffening as though she were flinging him a challenge:

"You wouldn't invite them to your mother's house?"

"Obviously not! I'll walk up birds with any man, but grouse-driving's a filthy business, to my mind; I can't stop other people doing it, because it may not seem a filthy business to them; but I'm hanged if I'll allow it on my own moors."

"That's . . . more tolerant than I expected. . . . D'you find, as you go through life, that you have fewer rules and more exceptions? Jack . . . Jack, however selfish I may seem, I don't believe you'd condemn me if you knew how much I've been tempted. I wanted *some* love in my life, . . . but I'm . . . *haunted* by the fear that you may come to regret it. That's why I wouldn't write; that's why it's best for us not to meet." . . .

"Don't you want us to meet?"

Joan sank to the floor with her hands clasped over his knees:

"My dear, my dear! Last autumn I thought I *could* get on without you. I *can't*. . . . At least, I'd sooner be really dead than have no one to give my love to. When I was working to make you comfortable, to give you the frame that I thought would suit you, oh, I was so happy that I almost forgot you weren't there. I want to do everything I can for you, and the only thing seems to be for me to vanish absolutely."

"Which will no doubt make us both more happy than we are at present," he laughed.

"You'd find some one much prettier, much cleverer . . ."

"That's the beauty of being able to turn on one's affections with a tap."

"Ah, don't laugh at me, Jack! I want you, but I swear I want even more to see you happy. And you won't be happy if you waste your love on me. . . . How can I explain? I don't drink, I don't take drugs." . . .

"I wasn't regarding it as a waste," Jack interrupted as soon as she gave him a chance of speaking. "Joanie, d'you know you're looking quite plain once more? Smile! That's better! Now . . . You must play this hand for me. In the last six months I've been infernally dull when I was away from you, . . . I want what *you* want. I'll do anything for you, but you mustn't think I'm calculating how much I can squeeze out of you in return. I've no doubt you know a tremendous lot about life, but you don't seem to have learnt that men get a purely selfish pleasure out of doing what they can for people they love. I'd have come the moment you sent for me . . ."

"I should have despised you if you had."

"But this isn't a tug-of-war."

"You were right before; and you're wrong now! Oh, I know how it's going to end!"

"I don't! And I don't care. We can jog along as we're doing now." . . .

With a sigh of despair at his complacency, Joan drew herself to her feet.

"Nothing ever remains the same in love," she warned him. "One fine day . . . there'll come a snap." . . .

"You're playing the hand."

"I'm trying to save you, and you won't help me!"

Her change of tone caused him to look up in time to see her covering her face. Though he had often observed her to be highly-strung, once with the traces of tears still on her cheeks, Jack had never imagined that Joan could cry in his presence; and her sudden piteous frailty of bearing drove away his spirit of banter. Walking to her side, he pulled gently at her hands, only to force her head lower till she stumbled forward and buried it on his chest.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," he begged her.

His lips, already touching her hair, pressed forward and kissed her cheek, then her eyes, then the other cheek. With a last sob, she raised her head till he could kiss her trembling mouth:

"I *can't* let you go!"

"I don't want you to," he answered unsteadily.

"We're wrong! It *can't* go on like this!"

"I shan't try to change it. That I promise."

Joan slid from his arms and sank on to a chair with her back to him:

"Whatever happens, . . . try to forgive me!"

"There can be nothing to forgive. . . . Everything will always be as it is now . . . as long as you want it."

Joan sat for a moment in silence; but, when he came again to her side and again bent to kiss her, she shook her head in bitter self-reproach at the change that had already taken place between them. In the half-forgotten days when she came to life again, she had decided that he must never kiss her. Then she was protecting herself; but, now that his lips came and came again in search of hers, she knew that the protection was needed for him and that she could not give it. Day by day he would grow weaker under the attack of his own passion; and, since he refused to take her as Curtis had done, his passion would first madden him and then turn to loathing.

"What are you doing to-morrow?" he asked as she extricated herself from his arms.

Before he left her, they had arranged a chain of meetings for the following week. As Jack was but newly settled in London, they had to employ a devious diplomacy in fending off the invitations of his other friends.

"Must I lay this at the door of the romance?" Bertie Millbank enquired, after his third failure to secure Jack's company at dinner.

"If you can imagine me having a romance with Beatrice Anker that night," Jack answered imperturbably. "She's roped me in for a ball on behalf of some undeserving object."

"Ah, crime, crime!" Bertie apostrophized; "what charities are committed in thy name! . . . I refused on

the ground that you were dining with me. I might go if I thought I should see the romance."

"You won't."

"It's still going strong, I suppose? Well. . . . You're an odd creature, Jack. Are you content to drift on like this indefinitely?"

"I hope it won't be 'indefinitely.'"

"You're not wasting your time with somebody who's keeping you handy till a better offer comes along?"

"I hope not."

"For your own sake you should come to a decision one way or the other. If you're seeing her every day, sitting up half the night talking to her, well, it's like a long engagement; you'll get on each other's nerves, as I warned you before, and there'll be a snap."

"I hope not," Jack answered again; and they parted smiling, though it was a curious coincidence that Bertie and Joan should have used the same word in predicting a "snap."

Apart from the occasional jocosity of inquisitive friends, the only difficulty in this new life was to realize that he was awake. Day after day he hurried home from the War Office, hardly believing that he would find Joan in the little bow-window overlooking the Green Park, missing and finding her again in the dining-room, wet-fingered, with a regiment of vases and a jungle of roses. Night after night, as he stood on the balcony, she would steal to his side resting a white, bare arm on his shoulder and laying a cheek of incredible softness against his. At dinner they adventured among books, interrupting the meal to read favourite passages aloud; and afterwards, while he smoked, she would play to him until the magical moment when she curled herself on a cushion, protesting

that she must go, and he stroked her short hair, whispering that she must stay five minutes longer.

Her way home lay by side-streets, where they could walk hand in hand, bareheaded, with the wind of early summer mingling with their whispers. "*Good-night, my dear one.*" "*Bless you.*" "*Sleep well.*" "*Until to-morrow.*" And every morning Jack woke with the same startling realization that he would be seeing her again within six hours. And so for ever . . . until the day when she should tell him: "*I once said I could never marry you. I want to say now . . .*"

At present she gave no hint. . . .

*"Love lives on hope, they say;
Or love must die.
Yet my love lives, although
No hope have I."*

As he watched from his balcony one night in June, Jack caught himself whistling the air without at first remembering the words. Joan crept in unheard and worked out an accompaniment; but, when she waited for the words, he protested that he had not sung since he came down from Cambridge:

"You know it, surely? It's a thing out of *Patience*. The D'Oyly Carte people used to give us a week every year." . . .

"I don't know Cambridge at all. My brothers were all at Oxford."

That night Jack talked of King's and of Eton. They planned expeditions and sketched an ideal tour, which had to be abandoned because they could not stay in hotels together. And, hardly seeing that he was tempting her, he let fall memories of Indian nights and Egyptian dawns which they would see together . . . some day.

If she noticed these artless references to the time when they were to be married, Joan affected to see no meaning in them. All her skill was needed to make possible a life which, from the outset, she knew to be impossible. Throughout the spring and summer they were cut off from their friends and from the world about them as though they were in prison: Jack might, indeed, bring home a rag of gossip from the War Office, she might encounter an acquaintance in the street; but they were afraid to dine in public or to visit a theatre, afraid to stay in the same houses; and, in securing themselves from intrusion, they shut out everything that could keep their love from becoming self-absorbed. For a while they explored the years before their first meeting; but Jack felt no interest in describing places and people that were unknown to her, and Joan dismissed her own life and family in so few words that he could never keep her sisters distinct or remember their husbands' names. Driven in upon themselves, they found their love becoming obsessive; and, when silence fell between them, one or other would hurriedly break it for fear of seeming indifferent.

In July, Joan wrote to say that she was suffering from the heat and would be unable to lunch with him; but Jack's anxiety, when he hurried to Old Burlington Street on his way to the War Office, was so poignant that she was driven to confess her real motive:

"There's nothing the matter with me, but I wanted you to have a holiday from me. You never go anywhere or see anybody . . ."

"I don't want to see anybody but you," he interrupted.

"But, darling, this isn't normal! You'll get tired of me." . . .

"That's not very likely."

"It's quite certain. A man's life is varied: he has work and friends and amusements; he plays games and is expected to know about politics. Women are more accustomed to staying at home: most of them have houses and babies to look after." . . .

"Are you happy now?"

"Yes."

"You're not bored?"

"I could never be bored with you! You're so sweet and unselfish. I could sit all day without speaking, my head against your knee . . . basking in your love. . . . But we can't sit like that for ever. Think, you silly boy! In twenty years' time . . ."

"It was you who said 'If only it could always be like this' . . ."

Until he saw her involuntarily biting her lip, Jack did not realize that there was recrimination in his tone. Whenever she told him that their life was artificial, he wanted to remind her who had made it so: once or twice he had prepared a stately defence to shew that she must not blame him for yielding to her wishes; and, if the speeches were undelivered, their bitterness remained in his heart and sometimes overflowed on to his lips.

"I don't want you to grow tired of me!"

Jack caught her in his arms and kissed away her protests. Henceforward, Joan saw, as she watched him hurrying away to his office, their imprisonment held no hope of commutation: if she protested again, there would be sharp, foolish questions and renewed assurances that neither could ever weary of the other;

she might arouse a jealous fear that she was pining for some other man; already he had become so dependent on her that he could not imagine a life apart. "My God, if anything happened to you!" . . . His words and his expression that morning warned her of the terrible, unsought power which she had gained. When he kissed her, she became conscious of a growing hunger in his lips and eyes that rebuked her for transforming their passionless friendship by her own first kiss.

"You're playing the hand," he had reminded her from the doorway.

"I don't feel I'm playing it particularly well," she sighed.

For once there was no reassuring answer; and his implicit reproach warned her that she must extricate herself by marrying or by leaving him.

Failing to lower the temperature of their intimacy by sending him into fresh air, Joan made one attempt to force fresh air upon him. If she could herself invent excuses for escaping the self-imposed imprisonment, she might drive him to seek distraction elsewhere. Beginning with a dinner-engagement which she could not avoid, she proceeded to a week-end in the country; at length, greatly daring, she hinted at independent plans for the autumn.

"The Mountjoy-Stirlings? I don't know them," said Jack dully. "But, if you're going to Braemar, you must break the journey at Invercaldy."

"I should like that, if I can manage to fit everybody in. When will you be there?"

"That depends on you. When do you start?"

"Early in August. I shall be away three months."

Though she made a declaration of her words, Joan

looked up for permission. The single dinner had been grudged, the week-end resented; he could not bear her to be away, and she was now an unwilling torment when they were together.

"Shall I . . . see you after that?" he asked.

"Darling, of course you will!"

"I hope so. I've been thinking . . . I've taken more than my fair share of you lately." Well though she knew him, Joan had to study his expression before she could be sure that he was not avenging himself in irony. "You've been a perfect angel, and I'd really forgotten that you must have other friends . . . with claims on you. I'm afraid I was in a filthy temper when you sprang it on me that you were going away for the week-end. I'd been counting on having you to myself . . . as usual. Say you forgive me, Joanie."

"If I'd known you wanted me for anything special, I'd have stayed! I'd always sooner be with you; I'd always sooner say 'yes' than 'no.' These people in Scotland . . . If I can do any good by staying on in London as long as you're here, I'll stay."

"No, I don't want to upset your plans. I'm beginning to think you're right after all: a holiday might do us good. If you *can* come to Invercaldy—it must be while I'm there; my people don't know of your existence—I hope you will; I should love you to see the place." . . .

"Unless you think a complete holiday will be better?"

A sombre smile flickered for a moment over Jack's face; then he sighed and looked away from her, pressing his temples between his hands:

"There'll be other people there. I'm going for the first shooting party. It won't be the same as if you and

I were alone . . . D'you remember talking about a snap, Joanie? I thought I was pretty level-tempered; but the last few weeks my nerves have simply been on edge, I've pulled myself up on the verge of saying the most appalling things, abusing you, asking why the devil . . . Once or twice I said to myself that I simply wouldn't have anything more to do with you, I'd go abroad. . . . I don't know what's been the matter with me! I hope I've not *said* anything very bad, but I've really had no control over what I've been thinking. In the autumn . . ."

Involuntarily Joan shook her head at his fancy that time would reduce his fever so long as she was at hand to stimulate it. The movement passed unseen, and she walked to his side on her way to the door:

"You're going to begin the holiday this minute. I'll let you know later whether I can come to Invercaldy. . . . Will you . . . give me a meal . . . between now and then . . . if I wire to say I want to see you very urgently?"

"But of course!" Jack answered. "Where are you going?"

There was no reply; and, on looking round, he discovered that he was alone.

For the first time in twelve months Jack felt too tired even to speculate what new fog had invaded Joan's brain. It was a relief to be alone and secure from the temptation of saying bitter things, a relief to think of her without bitterness, a relief to cease thinking of her at all.

"She gave me fair warning, I went into it with my eyes open. And this is the end." . . .

When she spoke of inviting herself to a meal, she was shirking the abruptness of a final "good-bye." Ap-

parently she was going because he had reached breaking-point and she could see it. So her affection was unselfish at the end, as it has been unsordid throughout; and, at the end, he understood her less than at the beginning. In words which he could neither mistake nor forget, she had offered to be his mistress: protestation of love and proof of devotion were alike powerless to make her his wife.

His reverie was interrupted by the announcement of dinner; and Jack realized with a start that Joan had come to dine with him as usual and had vanished within five minutes of her arrival. What must his servants think?

"Miss Prendergast . . . had to . . . go away suddenly," he told his man. "I . . . think I'll go and dine at the club."

It was impossible to sit by himself in a room where he had never eaten a meal without her; it might well be impossible to live in rooms where every corner held a memory of her, like a lurking sunbeam. At present he was too conscious of relief to guess how much he might miss her; but, as he walked into his half-forgotten club, he looked uncertainly about him, like a man awaking from an age-long trance.

Bertie Millbank, loitering by the tape-machine, hurried across the hall and seized him by the arm:

"If you're giving the romance an evening off, you must dine with me. Reggie's coming; and, on the lowest grounds, you must give him the chance of getting a third of two bottles of champagne when he only expected half of one."

"You're lucky to get more than half a glass of froth if you split a bottle of champagne with Reggie. . . . I should like to come, if I'm not butting in."

"I nearly invited you, but I thought it would be hopeless. We wanted to talk about dates for Invercaldy. Lady K. told us to choose our time, and we wanted to come together."

In the dining-room Jack listened with half his attention to echoes of a forgotten world. It was a year since he had set foot there; but, though he hardly remembered the names of men whom he had seen dining at the same tables in the same company, night after night, they were still in their old cages, still at their old tricks, debating food with the waiters and wine with the butler, telling the same stories, playing variations on the same age-old personal jests. If death had emptied a few of the chairs, there were younger men waiting to fill them: Bertie, Reggie, himself. . . . Jack had always assumed that he would marry: what, otherwise, would become of Invercaldy? If Joan refused to marry him, no one could take her place; he had told her so, hardly realizing how she had spoiled every other woman for him.

"Old Wharton's looking for a table. Shall I ask him to join us?" he asked. The day would come when he would himself be despised and unwanted, thankful when younger men tolerated him for a single evening. "We were talking about dates for Scotland," he explained.

"Lady K. hasn't said anything to me about coming this year," Wharton answered disconcertingly.

"You'd better roll along with us."

An hour later Jack discovered that his dinner had been ordered for him, that he had eaten it, that Wharton—presumably from gratitude for the invitation—had paid for it and that all four of them had been talking without leaving on his mind the recollection of

a single word said. He had expected to feel better after the champagne, but it seemed only to stimulate his memory for tormenting scraps of old speech with Joan. "*My God, if anything happened to you. . .*" Something had in fact happened to her. She had vanished from his life.

"They'll think I'm tight if I go away now," he reflected. "I don't care what they think." . . . And he had started to his feet before he remembered that Joan, already once trapped in her room, would not take refuge there again if she wanted to avoid him. "I don't know where she is." . . .

It was only by prowling the streets that he could keep away from the telephone. Whatever Joan might think of him, he would despise himself if he begged or bullied her to come back; at present he had no reason to be ashamed of himself, though he was in danger of cutting a pitiable figure if he flung himself hysterically at some one who did not want him. At such times a man had to set his teeth.

It would have been pleasant to tell the whole story to Bertie, to confess to his mother the blinding pain of losing what was more precious than life and of living on without hope or interest. Pleasant but cowardly; a man had no business to inflict his private sorrows on other people, no business to shew when he was hurt nor to reveal that any one could hurt him.

"Just cut this out," he counselled himself; "and start at *once*, without sentimentalizing," he added.

To return home, knowing that he would not sleep, demanded resolution; but he could not afford to be frightened by empty rooms. For this one night he would have liked to drink himself insensible; but, all other objections apart, this would not help him to face

the morrow. Considering the state of his nerves, he had probably been unwise to touch champagne at all.

"Out of condition," he decided; "that's what I am." . . .

And, in planning a daily course of work to keep his mind occupied and to kill the time which hitherto he had spent with Joan, Jack paced up and down his bedroom until daybreak warned him that he was shirking the problem of sleep. Three hours later he debated whether to take a day's holiday from the War Office, but that would be shirking the next difficulty; he must be prepared to meet people, prepared to dine at his club, without regarding it as a tomb, prepared even to put up with the sallies of any one that he had been fool enough to admit to his confidence. If Bertie, usually the least tiresome of men, felt obliged to enquire nightly after "the romance," Jack was determined to outstay him in patience:

"So far as I know, the romance is just where it was when last you expressed an interest in it."

"Are you taking it to Scotland?" Bertie persisted. "I was thinking about sleepers." . . .

"Well, don't forget Frank Wharton."

"I won't. . . . Would you like any . . . *additional* accommodation?"

"If I do, I'll turn out you or Reggie."

In time the wearisome enquiry languished and died away. Jack hoped that, with practice, he would find it easier to perform his daily exercises in self-discipline; but, after a week, he applied for leave and motored into Wales and back. Open air, rapid motion and the effort of driving compelled him to sleep; and, though he felt the presence of a ghost by his side whenever he stopped for a meal or slowed down to admire the

scenery, at least he was spared the hourly pain of keeping his ears and eyes shut to the ghost that walked with him from room to room in London.

"If you hear of any one who wants a place like this, let me know," he told his servant on returning to Piccadilly twenty-four hours before he was due to leave for Scotland. "I'm thinking of a small house . . . somewhere near Roehampton . . . so that I can get some exercise. . . . I don't know." . . .

He broke off to wonder what this immobile, inhuman creature made of Joan's disappearance. She had lunched and dined there daily for three months. . . .

"Are these all my letters?" he asked after looking in vain for her handwriting in the week's accumulation of notes and telegrams. "Did any one ring me up?"

What did this incurious, detached creature make of such superfluous questions? Had there been a telephone message from Joan, it would have been taken down and given him with the rest; a letter from her would have lain with the other letters. Jack experienced a moment of exasperation at betraying himself; it was followed by insane anger, and he resolved that, if he went to Roehampton, the house should be filled with new servants who could neither gossip nor speculate about a strange alliance that had died as quickly and as unexpectedly as it had burgeoned.

All letters, all telephone messages had been collected and arranged in order of date, as any one might have foreseen. All parcels, all papers. . . . Jack realized that, despite his determination to start again as though nothing had happened, he had so completely lost interest in everything that he had not looked at more than the headlines of the newspapers. As an exercise

in self-discipline he read for an hour: a new Irish policy was foreshadowed . . . as usual; and, as usual, the Supreme Council was meeting somewhere; and the House of Commons seemed to be creating a new record in legislation before the session closed; and the Law Courts were very busy with the last cases in the list. "*Restitution Suit Against a Peer.*" Lady Edgbaston had apparently been driven to the limits of human endurance and was preparing her escape. Jack was trying to dovetail this information with the latest rumours of Beatrice Anker's activities, when he was called to the telephone.

"Jack? It's me, darling." For a moment he heard nothing more; then the blood ebbed away from the cataracts which seemed to have been pouring between his ears and brain. "Can you hear? You remember promising to let me ask myself to a meal? I'm in the country at present, but I could come up. . . . When do you go to Scotland?"

"To-morrow night."

"Are you doing anything at lunch-time?"

"Nothing that can't be put off."

"I don't want you to disappoint any one. . . . If I could see you any other time . . . It won't take more than a minute. . . . I can't say it on the telephone . . . and I can't write it because I don't know how to explain." . . .

"My God!" Jack found himself shouting as though there were no wire to link them. "Joan! Look here. . . . Yes, any time you like, but you must tell me now. . . . Joan, is it . . . is it *bad* news?"

"I don't know what to call it," she answered miserably.

"Then you must tell me now . . . just whether . . .

Joanie, it's not to say you're going to marry some one else?"

"Oh, my *dear*, no!"

"Thank God!"

For a moment the wire was silent; and, when Joan spoke again, her voice trembled so that it was almost inaudible:

"Sweetheart, does it matter to you as much as all that?"

"You know it does!"

"I didn't! . . . At least . . . I hoped you'd find it didn't *really* matter after all. If I thought I'd made you unhappy . . . I've been thinking desperately hard; that's what I want to talk to you about. . . . Oh, I wish I knew what to say!"

The voice, distant and thin as the echo of a whisper, maddened Jack with the sense of his own futility. To argue and entreat, nodding and gesticulating through space, made him feel as much a lunatic as when he caught sight of his own red and frowning reflection.

"Joanie! . . . Where in the name of God are you? I'll come to you to-night! I must see you! . . . Tell me . . . tell me *something*! A hint . . . I'd sooner face it now, *whatever* it is." . . .

"I don't know what it is. . . . Jack darling, let me lunch with you to-morrow. You *know* I want to do whatever will make you happy. I wish, oh, I *wish* . . . Jack, I'm going to disappoint you terribly. Yes, I am! Oh, I wonder if you love me enough not to mind! . . . *I'll . . . do . . . whatever . . . you want*; . . . and please God you won't regret it." . . .

Part Three

Part Three

CHAPTER ONE

“MY BROTHER’S KEEPER . . .”

“I will be an enemy unto thine enemies, and an adversary unto thine adversaries.”—EXODUS, xxiii, 22.

“We are expecting you as usual. It will be the same party as last year. The trains are the same; and, if you can come a few days before the others, as you usually do . . .”

At the outset of her autumn preparations, Isabel Mordaunt had to turn back to the beginning of Lady Keithley’s invitation to calculate how many variations had been played on the words “usually” and “same.” Native conservatism, crystallizing in the void of two uneventful lives, had established at Invercaldy a routine more in keeping with a public institution than with a private house. On fixed dates a number of tried friends were invited for specific purposes; at certain unchanging seasons Sir William and his wife made pilgrimage to London and Aix; between these periods of disturbance, they lived by themselves, rising, eating and retiring at the same hours, working of a morning in the garden, exercising dogs in the afternoon, reading the London papers until dinner and

dozing afterwards over the literature which their Edinburgh librarian chose with an unfaltering instinct for his customers' limitations of taste. The Keithleys' book-box was a revelation of the Keithley character. Volumes of travel compensated them for staying rooted to one place; biographies of every period and country gave them a sense of vicarious participation in the slow development of the world; political and economic essays secured them from the charge of bigotry; and a guarded selection from modern works of imagination enabled Sir William to say with authority that new writers were useful in sending him back to his old favourites. Lady Keithley admitted frankly that she had neither time nor inclination for novels and plays in which a tribe of doubtlessly clever young people demolished, to their complete satisfaction, the beliefs and conventions which, when all was said and done, had made the English what they were.

It was part of the Keithley tradition, ever since Isabel had been at school, that she should come to Invercaldy at the beginning of August. While the house was opening for the first shooting-party, she could make herself useful to her hostess in a hundred ways; and the Keithleys recognized that, though the men came primarily to shoot, they would be disappointed to find no female society. More would have been provided if it had been obtainable; but the way of life at Invercaldy did not bring those who lived there into contact with young girls. If Jack wanted to meet them, he could take his choice, with the aid and under the surveillance of Mrs. Ferguson; hitherto, however, he had been more than content with the company of Isabel.

"The usual letter of thanks," she decided, though

she prayed silently that the party might not be the same as a year before.

It was then that she perceived for the first time a new spirit working under the familiar forms. The tradition of identity was broken. In a mood of restlessness, extending now over eighteen months, Jack seemed anything but content with his work, his home, his family and his friends.

So unmistakable was the change that Isabel would not have been surprised if her invitation had been withheld. It was folly in his parents to force a meeting when Jack was assiduously avoiding her. She accepted from a dim regard for loyalty: to the Keithleys, if they were trying to rescue him from an entanglement; to herself, if indeed he was no longer interested in her. To run away from him was to confess failure when she had never admitted to herself that she was trying to win his interest; but, as she packed and drove to Euston, Isabel resolved that this should be her last visit to Invercaldy, at least until she could come back masked in indifference. Lying sleepless as the train roared through tunnels or rattled through stations, she divined that this was her last chance. Lady Keithley knew enough to refrain from inviting her to march in Jack's triumph; but, if he did not make his decision now, after a year of experimenting and comparing, he would in fact have decided against her.

When the train wound its way through the Invercaldy hills and drew up at the familiar bleak station, Isabel decided that she could have dispensed with some of the unchanging ritual. Lady Keithley, bare-headed in a glistening mackintosh, embraced her as though she were once more returning from school;

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the chauffeur, who always refused to accept money from her on the plea that she was one of the family, welcomed her "home"; and Sir William greeted her on the terrace with his time-honoured salutation:

"'Lass diesen Händedruck dir sagen Was unaussprechlich ist.'"

"As soon as you've had your breakfast," Lady Keithley announced, "I'm going to pack you off to bed for a *good* rest till lunch."

"I'm really not tired. . . . When do you expect the others?" asked Isabel.

"On Thursday. It's only a small party: Bertie, General Pierrepont, Reggie . . . oh, and Frank Wharton. I thought you found him rather tiresome a year ago and I hadn't meant to invite him; but Jack met him at dinner." . . .

"Is Jack coming?"

Isabel blushed slightly in asking a question that in other days would have been unnecessary. When she recalled the shifts by which she had tried to get news of him, the blush deepened. At first she could pretend that, as Jack was certainly in love, she was anxious to know that he was giving his love to a woman who would make him happy; later, when she artlessly led Bertie to say that he had seen him "at the club," or Reggie that they had lunched together "at Ascot on Cup Day," she realized that her curiosity was prompted by blinding jealousy.

"We hope to have him for a few days," answered Lady Keithley.

"As Cicero says," her husband added: "*'Hominès pròniores sunt ad voluptatem, quam ad virtutem.'*" Jack's been gadding about so much that we never feel sure of seeing him till he arrives."

"I suppose he must have been very busy furnishing his new flat, though I've not seen it . . . yet."

"Nor have we," said Lady Keithley. "When we were in London last month, he took us to dine at Ranelagh once or twice. Have you seen him lately?"

"I don't think I've had two words with him since we were all here last year."

The admission was volunteered in the hope of its extracting reciprocal confidences; but Lady Keithley only frowned and plied her guest with more food.

For the next three days there was enough work in the house to keep Isabel from thinking overmuch; but, as the time of Jack's arrival drew near, she became so nervous that she played frantically with the idea of having herself recalled to London. Throughout the war, when she prayed night and day for his safety, she had never doubted that he would come back; though she hardly admitted it to herself, she had never doubted that he would come back to her. How was she to start again if he shewed by manner or word that she no longer interested him? What was left when she turned her back on Invercaldy, to be forgotten before she was out of sight?

When the London train announced itself with a trembling pennant of steam, Isabel escaped to the garden with scissors and a basket to cut roses for Jack's room. It was part of the ritual; and she wanted no spectators for their meeting. If he required congratulations or sympathy, he must seek her out; and she only prayed that he would come quickly. After eighteen months, this woman who had bewitched him must surely know whether she would let him go!

A clamour of men's voices warned her that the car had arrived; a sudden hush told her that they were fil-

ing into the house; the voices were raised again in the dining-room; and she heard phrases of consolation:

"Oh, I *hope* it's all right. . . . No good meeting trouble half-way, you know, Lady K." . . .

Dropping her basket, Isabel hurried into the house and stood, unremarked but fighting for breath, on the fringe of a group with General Pierrepont and Lady Keithley in its centre.

"You've had no wire?" she heard. "Well, it's early yet; and, if he couldn't catch the train, he wouldn't be in time to send off a wire yesterday evening."

"He didn't *tell* any of you that he might be kept in London?" asked Lady Keithley.

Bertie insinuated his way into the circle:

"He told me quite definitely he *was* coming. I booked the sleepers some weeks ago, and we were all going to dine together. Then, the night before last, he telephoned to say that he'd probably have rather a lot to do next day, so he'd meet me at Euston. I expect he's wanted at the War Office for something."

So Jack had not come after all! The woman to whom he was enslaved no doubt could not spare him. In her relief at postponing the encounter, Isabel came boldly into the room; and the mystery of Jack's latest eccentricity was left unsolved as she exchanged greetings and shepherded the new arrivals to breakfast.

"There's been a lot of doping and robbing lately," Reggie informed his hearers, as they took their places. "If he's been sandbagged in Limehouse, you can't expect to hear from him for a day or two, Lady K. Or, as I told these men last night, he may have eloped with some one else's wife: you might get a letter from the south of Spain in about a week. Or he may have

been killed in a motor accident: then you mustn't expect to hear from him at all."

Finding his audience unresponsive, he concentrated his attention on the food before him.

"*'Hei mihi! difficile est imitari gaudia falsa,'*" murmured Sir William. "*'Difficile est tristi fingere mente jocum!'*"

"That means—quite literally—that he was bound to have a sticky end of some kind," Reggie confided to Isabel. "It'll be the natural reaction after the way he's been brought up."

Without wasting time on an answer, Isabel tried to adjust herself to the new conditions. Hitherto her mind had been too much taken up with Jack to leave her any thoughts for Frank Wharton; but, in looking round the table, she found that he had sidled into the place next to hers. When she turned to him, he greeted her with ingenuous pleasure and surprise, hinting that she was at once the last person he expected and the first he hoped to find at Invercaldy. His subsequent furtive scrutiny, however, warned her that she must be prepared to see his attack reopened. By presiding over breakfast and by seconding Lady Keithley's efforts in hunting her guests to their rooms, Isabel secured herself an untroubled morning; and, when they set out for the links after luncheon, she was careful to go in the same car as General Pierrepont and to invite Bertie, as the best player, to partner her. By these tactics the offensive was delayed; but it broke out as soon as she had revealed her plan of defence:

"I . . . may be wrong, but you seem to be avoiding me." Isabel started at the wheeze of a voice when she fancied that she was walking alone. "May I help you find your ball? It's more this way. . . . I just wanted

to let you know this isn't altogether my fault: I didn't invite myself this time. Jack invited me one night when I ran into him quite accidentally at the club; I accepted before I heard you were going to be here."

"But you've as much right to be here as I have," Isabel answered. "You've become distressingly humble all of a sudden, Frank."

"One doesn't like to feel one isn't . . . welcome."

"Now one is becoming distressingly dignified. It's such a pity you've never learnt how to be friends. You always reject my poor little overtures."

"Because I want so much more."

"And if I can't give it? . . . *Here* we are! Now you mustn't talk to me, or you'll put me off my stroke."

Wharton waited till the ball rose in a spurt of sand.

"You've never told me *why* it's impossible," he reminded her.

"Oh, *surely!* My dear, it's because I'm not in love with you."

"That's no reason for refusing *ever* to let me do *anything* for you." The pendulous cheeks, shot with threads of scarlet, flushed with indignation. "Isabel, I can't *stand* the sort of life I see you leading. You've no proper home; you go from house to house allowing people to make use of you. Where's it going to end?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I shall marry some day," she answered with attempted lightness. "But, if I were your worst enemy, you wouldn't want me to marry a man when I wasn't in love with him."

"It depends on the man. I'm a good bit older than you, but I know more what a woman expects than a

boy who's had no experience. I won't pretend there haven't been women in my life before . . ."

"Please, Frank!"

"But they were merely a passing distraction. You're the only one I've wanted to be my *wife*, the mother of my children."

Isabel stood silent while Bertie played on to the green within a foot of the pin.

"I suppose that's intended to be a compliment," she sighed, "but it rather disgusts me. I *loathe* a man who's *capable* of looking on women as a distraction! What would you think of me if I had distractions of that kind?"

"Oh, come! That's *rather* different."

For a moment, Isabel felt her careless liking for Wharton changing to a bitter hatred. Like all men, he expected that a woman should keep herself immaculate till he expressed a wish that she might become his wife, the mother of his children; he did not deny himself the indulgence, the satisfaction, the experience of philandering with one woman after another. Self-denial had no meaning for him; and, when he met a man like Jack, who held women sacred, probably he despised him as "a boy without experience." . . .

"Why should there be any difference?" she burst out.

Wharton shrugged his shoulders and waited for Reggie to play.

"You must take the world as you find it," he suggested.

"You must make the world as you want it," Isabel retorted. "I want a world in which there's the same law for men and women."

"And if you don't find your ideal?"

"You won't hear me complain. . . . They're waiting for you to play."

Disregarding Bagshot's furious pantomime on the green, Wharton moved forward at his own pace:

"I wasn't thinking of that. If you don't find your ideal, Isabel—I hope you will, though it will be the end of everything for me—if you *don't* find it, will you let me do my best to provide a substitute? Even if I'm *not* the man you want, even if I have to wait, even if people despise me for waiting so tamely, I shan't mind if you tell me at the end that I can help you."

Her sudden bitterness passed as quickly as it had come; and, with the impulsiveness of too taut nerves, Isabel was assailed with a desire to press the big, mottled hand which she could see nervously brushing little clots of moist sand from the steel of a club. Self-confessed in his imperfection, Wharton was for the first time speaking of love in terms of sacrifice as she had learned to think of it; in terms of understanding, too, as though he guessed that she was yearning for the unattainable and agonizing in loneliness.

"I shan't despise you," she answered softly. "If I come, I . . . shan't wait to be asked."

There was still no news of Jack when they returned from the links in time for tea. At the latest possible moment Lady Keithley sent a telegram to London; and, when the others came down to breakfast next morning, Sir William had ridden away to collect the London letters at Invercaldy station.

"I suppose Keithley won't dream of any shooting till he's had news of Jack," grumbled General Pierrepont, as the men adjourned in a mood of discontent to the terrace. "He's an inconsiderate young beggar."

"In the meantime, there's no reason why we shouldn't have healthy exercise of another kind," Bertie was beginning, when Lady Keithley emerged triumphantly from the house, with a telegram in her hand.

"The mystery's cleared up!" she cried jubilantly. "Isabel, *did* you see where I put my spectacles? Oh, it doesn't matter! You read it, Bertie. And, William, you'd better see about the car. If any of you want to be dropped at the links, you must be ready to start at once: I can't have my Jack kept waiting."

While she scattered her orders broadcast, Bertie took the telegram and declaimed its contents with the pomp of a town-crier:

"*'Handed in at Piccadilly at 9.0.' . . . You must have somebody's blood for this, Lady K.; it was handed in yesterday morning. 'Unable—secure—accommodation—coming—to-night'—that means last night—'coming—to-night—same train' . . .*"

"But there was a perfectly good sleeper reserved for him," Reggie interposed.

"Hush! He wanted a second," answered Lady Keithley.

"*'Coming—to-night—same—train. Stop,'*" Bertie resumed, "*'if—convenient'*" . . . He hesitated for a moment and then continued to read without change of intonation . . . "*'should—like—invite—Miss—Joan Prendergast—break—journey—few—days—stop. If—no—room—she—says—will—go—on—afternoon—train—Braemar—stop. Hope—no—anxiety—caused—Jack.'*"

As he handed the telegram to Lady Keithley, Bertie looked at his watch and then brushed a speck of dust from his shoes. This beloved child was lost to him;

and Jack, of all people in the world, had stolen her. There was a thousand-to-one chance that they had met by accident within the last few days, but in his heart Bertie felt sure that he held the clue to the long mystery of his friend's clandestine romance. It explained much; it explained so much that he did not know which part to elucidate first. At last he understood why he had seen so little of Joan for the last year, why she and Jack never mentioned the other to him. He wondered how they had met and whether Joan, who had confided so much, would still let him continue as her friend. Then, as though he had been bludgeoned, every other thought was driven out by blank amazement as he tried to imagine how much she had told Jack.

It was only when the interrupted murmur of conversation broke out afresh that he looked up. Sir William and Lady Keithley, who had been given time to realize the significance of Joan's coming, wore an expressionless mask; General Pierrepont, after looking up to hear the telegram read, was once more immersed in his paper; Reggie was smiling to himself mischievously. All of them knew that Jack was in love, all had been waiting for the name to be revealed; to some, there was added piquancy in the thought that, though they knew Joan well, she had conducted her little romance under their noses without betraying herself.

"Now that it's all over, I don't mind confessing that I *was* a little anxious," Lady Keithley admitted.

"Now that it's all over!" Reggie darted eagerly from General Pierrepont's side. "Dear Lady K., it's only just beginning! I said at Euston that it was probably an elopement. Bear me out, you fellows! I

included that in my yesterday's naps and finals. Now, Jack's been far too strictly brought up to think of eloping without his parents' consent . . ."

"What nonsense you talk, Reggie!" interrupted Lady Keithley, though to Bertie's hearing the laugh rang mirthless. "This is just some girl he's met . . ."

"And a very charming girl too," the general put in.

"Oh, you've met her? Up here we know so few of Jack's friends." . . .

Glancing covertly at Isabel, Bertie was compelled to admiration by her splendid calm. Though she knew as well as any why Joan was coming, she could talk imperturbably to Frank: "But, my dear, with that grip you're *bound* to slice." . . . Lady Keithley was urging them away to the links in the hope of having a preliminary conversation with Jack in private. . . .

"Are you playing, Millbank?" asked the general.

As soon as he realized that he was being addressed, Bertie told himself that Providence was ending his indecision for him. Pierrepont was a man of the world, a friend of all parties: Pierrepont must give judgement.

"I'd . . . like to stay and talk to you, sir, if I may," he answered. "A point on which I should like your advice . . ."

After the first shock of surprise and the first sense of loss, Bertie found his brain working quickly and in order as he prepared his case for arbitration. They might accept without argument that Joan was being brought for the inspection and approval of the Keithleys. When once they had convinced themselves that any one was good enough for Jack, they would be captivated by Joan's surface aspect. Was it any one's business to interfere? Either Joan had confessed her life with Curtis Anker or she had not. If she had,

if Jack wanted to marry her in spite of it, he was demonstrating that love had set a gulf between his present practice and his old, inhuman theory. So much the better; high time, too, Bertie reflected.

If she had not confessed, was it any one's business to confess for her? Bertie understood now why two people, admittedly in love, required more than a year to make up their minds. The delay was on Joan's side; and she feared that a confession would drive Jack away. The fear would have been well grounded in other days, however much Jack might have been humanized since. If it was still so well grounded that she lacked courage to tell him, were his friends under obligation to tell him on her behalf? What would happen if they did?

As the car drove away to the links, house and garden lapsed into the silence of utter desolation. Somewhere within, Lady Keithley was giving orders; but, on the empty terrace, it seemed to Bertie as if the general and he had all Scotland to themselves; and, as they strolled from the range of possible eavesdroppers and looked back on the warm roofs and slumbering windows, Bertie had a wild fancy that they were fleeing from a house threatened by earthquake.

"Did you say you wanted my advice about something?" asked the general.

Bertie led the way to a wooden seat and looked round cautiously:

"Yes. . . . I daresay you've gathered that the Keithleys have been rather worried about Jack lately. The only son, you know; and he's a pretty big catch. From time to time Lady K. charges me to see he's not getting up to mischief—which is absurd, because Jack's not that kind; I've told her that she mustn't

be surprised if he turns up one day and asks for the parental blessing. . . . Well, he's been very odd for the last year and more; his people don't know what to make of it; and when I heard he was bringing Joan Prendergast here . . ."

"You decided she must be the cause of all the trouble?"

"Well, is she, sir? You've met her."

"My dear Millbank, you must ask *him*. I invited Jack to dine with me . . . oh, a year ago; he'd already promised to give Miss Prendergast dinner, so I told him to bring her along. She was a very attractive girl, I thought."

"Oh, I'm devoted to her. That's what makes it so difficult. I'm devoted to Jack, too. But I'm not sure that they're altogether well suited. . . . If they want to marry, if you . . . well, if you heard something that would smash the whole business up, would you feel it your duty to tell Jack?"

"Oh, my Lord, what a question!"

"It's a question I have to answer in the next hour," Bertie returned. "I've been made his keeper."

CHAPTER TWO

A HOUSE DIVIDED

"Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?"—ST. JOHN, viii, 5.

I'VE no advice to give," General Pierrepont announced, when he had silenced Bertie and patrolled the lawn with a forbidding frown. "I'd sooner be left out of this. Bill Keithley's one of my oldest friends." . . .

"And Jack's one of mine. I . . . want to make you share the responsibility, sir," answered Bertie.

"I see you do! But I've been had this way before. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years ago, a man whom I'll call X. became engaged to a girl whose mother and grandmother had died of drink. He didn't know it; and she didn't tell him. I knew it . . . and I told him. The engagement was broken off. A few years later the girl married another man. There have been several children. No hint of trouble. And my friend . . . well, he ceased to be my friend. He regards me as the man who ruined his life; and I've not been so eager to interfere since. . . . I tried to make him see that I should have no answer if he said to me: 'You *knew* this, you let me walk into it blindfold.' . . . I've thought it over a good many times between that day and this; and I *still* think . . . on the whole . . . if there's a question of drink . . . or insanity . . ."

"If it's a scandal of some kind?" Bertie broke in.

"That's no concern of yours; you're not a private detective. If the father's doing time, you must assume that people read their papers; if he's been turned out of a club for cheating at cards . . ."

"If it's something to do with the woman herself?"

"I don't understand. This girl's a mere child."

"Still. . . . If there's been a scandal?"

"What d'you mean? Girls of that kind don't take lovers." As Bertie sat without speaking, the general's expression changed. "Good God!" he muttered.

"I shouldn't be talking to you like this if I wasn't at my wits' end. . . . She told me of her own accord, she would like to have told everybody in those days."

For several minutes the only sound was a faintly whistled rendering of the Toreador song from *Carmen*; then the general examined the cigars in his case and began once more to pace up and down with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Jack won't . . . thank you for the information," he predicted.

"Will he thank me when he finds out too late? 'You knew this,'" Bertie quoted ironically; "'you let me walk into it blindfold.'" . . .

"That was drink. . . . Inherited, incurable (that was how I regarded it) . . ."

"If Jack finds out that she's had *one* lapse . . . *That's* how *he* would regard it." . . .

"Is there any reason why he *should* find out?"

So insidious was the pleasure of having his own inclinations backed by an older man's experience and advice that Bertie set himself to explore the uttermost danger that might threaten him from following it:

"You remember Curtis Anker, who commanded the

second battalion after Vimy? He was the man she had this *affaire* with. His wife is a cousin of Isabel Mor-daunt's. I don't say that she knows anything. I won't say she's told Isabel anything. The landlord of the rooms where Joan used to live . . ." The debate was suspended by a distant hail; and they looked up to see three figures advancing across the lawn. "I believe I ought to tell him," Bertie muttered with a sudden revulsion of purpose.

Then both of them were caught up in a whirlwind of superfluous introductions.

For Joan's sake, Bertie sheltered himself behind the general. As likely as not Jack had not warned her who would be staying at Invercaldy; and, if the night journey had left any colour in her cheeks, it had ebbed away before she was half across the lawn. While Lady Keithley explained and advised about luggage and meals, recommending "a little rest" before luncheon and "a little something to eat or drink before the little rest," Bertie glanced at Joan's left hand. It carried no ring; and, if her relations with Jack were fairly represented by a new manner of gently paternal possession on his side, Bertie could have wished that they were unequivocally committed, to a point at which his own intervention would be fruitless.

As the general withdrew his cover, Lady Keithley attempted to dovetail another introduction into her proffers of refreshment.

"Miss Prendergast and I are old friends," Bertie explained, taking swift charge of the situation. Already Joan's involuntary shrinking from him had answered every question. "This is a delightful surprise! Did you have a good journey? We couldn't imagine

what had happened to Jack. . . . How are you, old man?"

His volubility screened Joan's passing confusion; and, by the time that Jack had advised her to wait for her luggage and had hurried indoors for a bath and shave, she had recovered her composure.

"You're quite the last person I expected to see here, Bertie," she told him as he led her to a chair and threw himself on the grass at her side.

"Jack is . . . my oldest friend," he answered with deliberation. "Have you never heard me speak of him?"

"I never dreamt you knew him. It was stupid of me, I ought to have remembered that you were in the same regiment. Somehow . . . I associated you with Curtis and Reggie Bagshot (I heard your name from Reggie the night after Curtis was killed. . . . I didn't know Jack in those days). And Jack I associated with Reggie . . . and Leslie Cornwallis . . . but not with you. I suppose it's because you've left the army. Bertie . . . Bertie, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"Oh, you know!"

Glancing sideways, Bertie saw in profile the sharp outline of a white, thin face under a level bar of dark hair. Joan was cowering on the edge of her chair, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on one hand. Her eyes seemed to be looking at the smoke-blue line of the Invercaldy Hills; but he knew that she saw farther or not so far. . . .

"I really don't know anything. Remember I've not seen you for months."

"No, I've been hiding. . . . I *nearly* came to see you, but I knew you'd tell me to do what I was always

telling myself to do, what I couldn't *bring* myself to do. . . . You can guess why I'm here: Jack's asked me to marry him, and I've said I will. I've come to be shewn off. If you hadn't been here, I might have . . . got away with it."

The cynicism of the trite, slang phrase jarred on Bertie's hearing like a deliberate discord.

"Does Jack . . . know?" he asked sharply.

Joan's head moved slowly from side to side:

"I tried all yesterday and the day before. . . . It was no good. Bertie, d'you remember dropping me at a dance? . . . oh, it was a million years ago. Hans Place. Mrs. Ferguson. That's where we met. His aunt's. . . . It began there; and he was ready to take all the love that had been running to waste ever since Curtis didn't come back. . . . Don't be too hard on me, Bertie: I *knew* it was hopeless and I avoided him, but he wanted me. I told him we could never be more than friends, and he promised not to drive me farther than I wanted to go. It was like heaven at first, but I began to see that I wasn't playing fair. I was taking all his love and wasting his time, wasting his life, making him miserable. I broke away . . . twice. This week I told him I'd marry him if he wanted me, though I should be a horrible disappointment. I *swear* I meant to tell him everything; but it would have broken his heart, Bertie, he wouldn't have understood. I see now that I can never tell him. So we must break it off . . . or go on with it . . . without explanations. . . . Are you going to give me my second chance?"

The question broke startlingly into Bertie's reflections. If these two had only made up their minds a week earlier, if they had only waited till he was out

of the house! It was bad luck on all three of them! Poor little Joan seemed perversely fated to lose every race when she was in sight of the goal.

"It doesn't rest with me," he fenced.

"I just want to know. . . . If I were in your place, I should have to tell," Joan continued half to herself. "It's dreadfully hard for you, Bertie dear; and I don't want to hurry you, but I *must* know. I could go on to Braemar by the afternoon train, but . . . I can't face a scene. . . . Perhaps—you *would* accept my word, wouldn't you, Bertie?—if I promise to go away for ever, you wouldn't have to tell the name: you can say anything you like about me, but Curtis can't defend himself. If I were you, I'd just say to Jack . . ."

"You assume I intend to tell him?" Bertie asked, with eyes averted.

"Dear God, if you weren't, you wouldn't keep me in this agony! I don't see how you can *help* yourself: you're bound in honour. . . . If I could teach you as much about women as Curtis taught me about men, you might think honour wasn't the highest thing in life. I think love is higher . . . sometimes; compassion . . . always. Some people would say you might do this because you were sorry for me. After all, is it worth spoiling two lives for the satisfaction of being told that you've behaved very properly in very difficult circumstances? Leave me out, if you like! I *had* my great love . . . with Curtis; this is something different, though I'm ever so fond of Jack. But I'm the great love of Jack's life; oh, I know it. If you spoil that, he'll never find anything but the second-best."

"And if he finds out?"

Joan shivered and jumped to her feet :

"We should never be forgiven," she answered, turning towards the house.

"Exactly."

"And . . . would you want to be?" The astonishing detachment, which enabled her to speak without pleading and to discuss herself as though she were a stranger, returned disabingly. "God *knows* I've no claim on you, but you'd have risked everything to make two people happy. . . . You feel you can't take the risk?" With a sigh, she looked once at the blue line of the Invercaldy mountains. "Well, you won't say anything till I've gone, will you? If I change now, we might meet somewhere and arrange how I'm to get away. My . . . brain won't work properly." . . .

As they strolled in silence across the lawn, Bertie pictured the day unrolling itself in the violent contrasts and crude emotions of a cinematograph film: the ecstasy of Jack and Joan when at length they ended their hesitations and doubts gave place to Joan's terror when her hard-won security was threatened; the bewilderment of the Keithleys in having to adjudicate on a daughter-in-law of whose existence they had hitherto not heard was followed by the spectacular triumph of Joan; the climax of her disappearance demanded the explanation which he alone could supply. . . .

In the later scenes Bertie found himself thrust into undesired prominence, arguing and contending with one after another, always saying too little when he was not saying too much, bungling and breaking. . . .

"For the satisfaction of being told that you've behaved very properly in very difficult circumstances . . ."

Spoken without mockery, Joan's words returned to mock him. That, no doubt, was what every one would say, though all of them would have been as powerless as the general to tell him what they would have done in his place.

"You didn't bring a maid?" he asked. "Give me your keys, and I'll find some one to unpack for you. Before we do anything irrevocable . . ." He hurried away and returned to find Joan standing where he had left her. "Sit down. We must thresh this out."

"There's nothing very much to thresh out, is there?"

"We'll see. I imagine I shall be equally in the wrong whether I say anything or not. I don't care a damn about my own position, but it seems that I shall wreck your life by telling . . . and, by not telling, I may wreck Jack's. Why won't you tell him yourself?"

"He wouldn't understand. Jack, thank God, has never had to suffer. . . . He might want me so much that he'd . . . try to forgive me. . . . And that . . . I think that's the one thing that would kill my love for him. I don't ask *God* to forgive me." . . .

"Will you tell his people?"

As though she had not heard him, Joan walked round the high, panelled hall, peering through the shadows at the portraits of departed Keithleys. An unconscious instinct arrested her once before a brawny Raeburn and again before an etherial Watts.

"And have three fights instead of one, when I'm worn out with fighting?" she asked. Then her submissiveness deserted her, as though she were fighting single-handed against all the Keithleys of the past and present. "I've nothing to explain or justify! Sometimes I think I ought to have been more patient with my own people; sometimes I wish I wasn't quite so

weak. I *need* some one to love; and when I'm lonely there's nothing I won't do to cure it. That's all I have to be ashamed of, Bertie. I haven't a spark of pride, but I can't defend myself before people who wouldn't understand. That's where *you* were so wonderful: you understood from the beginning." . . . With a touch that quickened the beat of his blood, she caught his hand and looked up with star-bright eyes: "D'you remember those funny little rooms and the big chair where I used to sleep? You stroked my head . . . and kept me from going mad! I was afraid to kill myself, but I hoped and prayed I might die. . . . Bertie, why didn't you let me?"

Her voice, rising from a somnolent monotone, filled the hall with a sob of pain. Both looked about them guiltily; and Bertie disengaged her hand before she added to his complications by making him Jack's rival.

"If we're not careful, you'll be late for lunch," he murmured in the prosaic voice which he had used to calm her when she first came to St. James' Street. Whatever the risk, he could not deny himself one more memory of the time when she would have married him from gratitude and he had thrown away his chance. "D'you remember when I washed your hands for you and brushed your hair?"

"'Dusting' I called it," Joan answered absently. "You seemed to be afraid of brushing it out of my head. And you washed my hands as though you thought my fingers would come off in water. You were very wonderful then. . . . But men always *have* been wonderful to me. . . . What a long time ago it all seems!"

"Yes. . . . The first time we met you told me you were 'twenty-nearly.'" No longer able to trust him-

self, Bertie turned on his heel and stumped towards the staircase. Joan watched him with wonder that changed to alarm when he leaned, laughing unmeaningly, against the wall. "It's all right! You wouldn't understand!"

"But what's the matter?"

Bertie beckoned without answering and led the way upstairs. Half the mistakes in life were due to impeccable motives! As a friend, it was his duty to tell Jack everything; and, when Joan was once more solitary and heart-broken, he could repair his wasted opportunity. Jack must not be told, and, if he found out, so much the worse for him; but Bertie realized that he had been tempted and that, in another moment, he would have tried to secure Joan for himself by parading his duty to the Keithleys.

"I was . . . thinking of . . . life's little ironies," he answered. "And life's big muddles. Joan, you *ought* to tell Jack; but I can't make you. If you won't, *I* ought to . . . and I'm not going to, for reasons of my own. We'll stand to be shot at together. . . . You understand, I'm not telling! Pull yourself together, Joan; *I'm not telling!* There! Good luck! Bless you! . . . And I wish to God I knew if I was doing right," he muttered as Joan hurried ahead of him up the stairs with her hands to her face.

When the door closed behind her, Bertie sat down by the window at the end of the passage. Clearly she must not be left to find her way to the gardens alone; as clearly he did not want to engage in conspiratorial whisperings with the general. On the lawn below he could see Lady Keithley in earnest deliberation with Jack; Reggie and Frank appeared in sight, striding home by a short cut from the links; and at the same

moment Sir William and General Pierrepont came on to the terrace, followed by the butler with a tray of decanters and glasses. There was no sign of Isabel: presumably she had gone to her room.

"This is going to be a facer for her, I'm afraid," Bertie told himself. "I hope Lady K. or somebody will have the decency to warn her, though I expect she's guessed already."

As though in answer to his unspoken wish, the party on the lawn wheeled towards the terrace and Jack hastened ahead into the house. His footsteps echoed on the wooden stairs; after a brief interval of silence a sound of voices floated from the direction of Isabel's door; the voices grew fainter, and Bertie saw a brown head and an auburn disappearing round the angle of the house.

"My conception of a *really* comfortable party," he sighed.

Lady Keithley was standing apart from her guests, talking in an undertone to Sir William, while Reggie performed conjuring tricks with a handful of cigarettes and a syphon. Joan had come out of her bath and was bustling to and fro in her room; Isabel, no doubt, was gallantly hiding her disappointment and charging herself with false enthusiasm for the moment when the news should be made public. The only actively happy man of the party was Jack; and love had rendered him so insensible that he could bound into the house with a fixed grin of joy to tell Isabel that her nightmare had come true.

"He's probably reminding her what old friends they are and saying that he wants her to be the first to congratulate him." . . .

Bertie turned from the window as a door opened and Joan appeared in a white blouse and skirt.

"You've been waiting for me?" she cried. "How wonderful of you! I'm so frightened, I should never have dared to go down alone. . . . Where's Jack?"

Bertie walked with her to the window.

"He was in the garden a moment ago. Yes, there he is! Talking to Miss Mordaunt."

Though he was moving towards the stairs, Joan lingered by the window, looking down in fascination as though she had flung her glove into an empty arena:

"The girl with auburn hair? I don't think I know her . . . though I believe she was pointed out to me in Paris during the armistice. She was with Mrs. Anker." . . .

"They're cousins."

"I could have murdered them!" Joan whispered. "It was only four months after Curtis had been killed; and there Mrs. Anker was, enjoying herself, letting some man make love to her . . . when all she'd done was to make Curtis wretched. . . . Bertie, d'you think very badly of me for wanting to marry Jack? I asked Curtis, but he'd . . . given up answering by then. He always used to say that if anything happened to him . . . But in those days I thought I *must* die if he died. . . . If Curtis could see it, I believe he'd understand; he'd know that nothing could take away our time together. . . . Tell me about Miss Mordaunt."

"She's . . . an old friend."

"I should have thought she was more than that," Joan murmured. "The way she looks up at Jack when she doesn't know any one's watching." . . .

"They've been brought up together."

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"And she's fallen in love with him. . . . Oh, Bertie, what a muddle life is! Does any one get more than the second-best? After Curtis, I can't pretend that even darling Jack is more than second-best to me; and, if I effaced myself, like the impossibly unselfish people in books, she'd be only second-best for Jack. . . . They told me in Paris that Mr. Wharton wanted to marry her; but, beside Jack, he's only second-best. . . . Yes, let's come down, Bertie. If I've known the agony of love, I've also known its glory; but, if I were God, making a new world, I don't think I'd let love in."

As they came on to the terrace, Sir William hastened forward with quiet gallantry:

"We are grateful to Jack for giving us this opportunity! Living in the wilds like this, I have to say, with old Montaigne, '*J'ay seulement faict ici un amas de fleurs estrangieres, n'y ayant fourny du mien que le filet a les lier.*'"

It was at once evident to Bertie that nothing was to be announced yet; and, while he studied the faces of Reggie and Frank to make sure that they, too, had guessed the reason of Joan's presence, General Pierrepont sauntered across the terrace, with eyebrows interrogatively raised.

"I don't know that I can give you any reason," Bertie whispered with a rueful shake of his head, "but I've decided to say nothing."

"We'll hope your excellent example will be followed."

"I'm sure to be wrong, whatever I do. . . . I can trust you, sir, to forget anything I've said. If I've made you feel in any way . . . censorious, I can correct it by telling you the whole story."

Before the general could answer, Isabel and Jack

sauntered into view at the end of the terrace; and Lady Keithley went forward, with her arm through Joan's, to make her last introduction:

"Now, my dear, a moment more; and then my duty's done. You've not met Miss Mordaunt. And, Isabel, you've not met Miss Prendergast."

In acknowledgement of Joan's bow, Isabel inclined her head gravely:

"No. . . . I've often heard of you . . . from my cousin."

To Bertie's stunned imagination it seemed that the world checked for a moment in its course. Not daring to look up, he waited, in stillness and silence, for his own heart to beat again. At length a dream-voice echoed:

"Your cousin?"

"Beatrice Anker."

"I have never met Mrs. Anker."

Though he meant to give no sign, Bertie found his eyes turning to see how much longer Joan could remain unmoved by this calculated declaration of war.

"I had an idea that Curtis was a friend of yours," persisted Isabel.

The name brought a flicker of interest to those who hitherto had not watched the furtive duel. Some one murmured: "I've always thought that was one of the saddest things in the whole war . . ."; some one else: "Yes, rotten luck; on the very eve of the armistice." . . .

Joan, meanwhile, had said nothing; and Bertie fancied that she was wondering whether to risk a denial. She had only to dismiss the name airily as that of a casual acquaintance.

As the temptation assailed Joan's heart, it drained the colour from her cheeks. Then her eyes brightened.

"Curtis Anker was the dearest friend I ever had," she answered.

CHAPTER THREE

COLONEL ANKER'S DEAREST FRIEND

"My credit now stands on such slippery ground,
That one of two bad ways you must conceit me,
Either a coward or a flatterer."

—SHAKESPEARE: *Julius Cæsar*.

I'M afraid I gave you a good deal of unnecessary trouble this morning, Bertie," whispered Joan as they went in to luncheon.

"Now, don't you lose your head," he counselled. "She can't *know* anything—you told me so; and if you can just keep up your courage . . ."

"I'm afraid that's a quality I've never possessed," Joan answered bitterly.

Looking back on the twisting road that had brought her to Invercaldy, she saw every phase of her life explained in terms of cowardice. Other girls would have set out with some independence of spirit; but she had always so feared the jangling scenes at Burdon Court that her will was surrendered to the domination of her brothers and sisters. Courage might seem to be required before she could throw in her lot with Curtis Anker; but, now that the war was over, she could see herself the victim of war-madness. There was nothing heroic in leaving a home which she hated, nothing brave or generous in giving herself to the man she loved, nothing even splendidly reckless in risking a disgrace that she never believed would come to her.

There would have been courage in resisting Curtis; and, after his death, there would have been strength in paying the price of her madness. Always, however, at every stage of the twisting road, she had reached for the support of some one else; Alec Henson, Bertie, the girls who had worked with her in the War Office, lastly Jack himself.

As the pictures of these way-side meetings passed through her memory, Joan fell into a mood of detachment and reviewed her life as though it had been lived by another. If cowardice and dependence continued constant, little else remained of the girl who had left home at eighteen to take up subordinate duties in a government office. From Curtis, who had taught her the pitiless strength of passion and the disabling lure of companionship, she had learned also a code of honour that, in its strictness and its limitations, seemed purely masculine. To herself, about herself and to all whom she met she was more truthful than the generality. From Curtis and from Bertie she had acquired a contempt for the self-seeking. Those whom she imitated and those whom she eschewed alike implanted in her a reverence for loyalty and openness of hand; a love, too, of tolerance and understanding: it was the duty of every one to "play up," "not to be everlastingly on the make," "never to let people down." The old phrases which Curtis had used were burnt into her brain: whatever she had become, she was not a vampire, like Beatrice Anker, nor a harpy, like the women of Reggie Bagshot's half-world; nor an inquisitor, like Isabel Mordaunt.

Confident that she was being watched, Joan kept her eyes lowered and responded with mechanical nods to the conversation which Bertie was valiantly maintain-

ing for her protection. Courage and self-reliance: she was afraid to face the empty threats of this girl, afraid to explain what she could not make understood; rather than endure a scene, she was ready to lose Jack; and she feared, most of all, to be left alone once more. It was contemptible; but she must have been born weak; and no one could imagine how utterly defenceless she felt in this strange company. The Keithleys had welcomed her charmingly; but they were now silent and preoccupied as they digested Jack's news. The others, guessing the reason of her coming, were watching the issue critically, like spectators of a coursing-match. Silent and preoccupied, too, Isabel Mor-daunt was waiting to strike.

As the meal dragged to an end, Joan stole a glance at the corner of the table where Jack was sitting. In three short hours the atmosphere of the house had changed him. Hitherto, in describing Invercaldy, he had laughed affectionately at his mother's foibles and his father's mannerisms; though he indulged their whims, he had a mind of his own. Now he was assimilated to their speech and outlook; she could not believe that he had ever threatened, against their wishes, to leave the army; certainly he would never defy them if they opposed the marriage.

"Oh, Bertie, can't I be ill or something?" she whispered, with a sudden collapse of resolution. "An excuse for getting away till it's all over? They've *seen* me. It's just 'yes' or 'no.' Can't you take me away?"

"It's too late now. If you want to win, you must be prepared to fight. What happened before Jack met you is not his business. Tell him so. If he doesn't

take you on your terms, he doesn't deserve you. If *he* wants to win, he must fight."

"I ought never to have come here!"

"It's no use thinking what we *ought* to have done. You're losing your nerve; and, once that begins, the game's up. Keep with me; and we'll pray the thing may be settled before any one can interfere. And let's be thankful to Reggie," he added with a smile: "he's succeeded in annoying so many people that they've forgotten everything in their desire to slay him."

As soon as coffee had been served on the terrace, Sir William withdrew to his study, motioning Jack to follow him. Lady Keithley lingered long enough to present General Pierrepont with a copy of *The Times* and Frank with his share of the midday mail. Then she disappeared arm-in-arm with Isabel; and, so long as Reggie consented to slumber over the week's illustrated papers, Bertie was left to demonstrate, no longer in guarded whispers, that Joan had nothing to fear. At this moment Sir William was no doubt giving judgement; if Jack had already gained Mr. Prendergast's assent, the announcement might be made that evening; then, if Isabel chose to use any knowledge that she might possess. . . .

"I don't see how she can," he decided. "She'll injure every one else without doing any sort of good to herself. And every one will say it was mere spite. . . . Besides, you *tell* me she can only have heard your name, without any proof." . . .

"If only they *would* announce it," Joan began, pausing as Jack sauntered on to the terrace.

His studiedly careless entry warned her that nothing was yet to be divulged; but, before he could come to

her, Isabel reappeared with Lady Keithley and murmured some request.

"Any time you like," Jack promised. "Joan wants to rest; but I can arrange a set for the others and then I'm at your disposal."

As Bertie turned away to collect the London papers, he saw apprehension in Joan's wide, startled eyes. Was this girl arranging her opportunity for telling?

A whispered "Not for the *moment* . . ." floated across the room, as Jack seated himself on the arm of Joan's chair. "See your father . . . Oh, I told *her*; I've always told her everything. . . . Good wishes: the usual thing. . . . Absolutely one of the very best. I'm surprised you never ran across her with Beatrice Anker. . . . Oh no, it was old Curtis you knew. Towards the end, Beatrice made you declare which side you were on. . . . Silly idiot! . . . Isn't that so, Bertie?"

"Isn't what so?" Bertie laid aside his paper and strolled to the other end of the hall.

"I was saying that, when the split came between Curtis and his wife, you weren't allowed to be friends with both. Naturally, as he was a brother-officer, we stuck to *him*, though I always thought he was a bit of a blackguard."

With a sudden stiffening that was mercifully unseen, Joan sat upright, gripping the arms of her chair.

"Is it . . . quite fair to attack a man . . . who can't defend himself?" she asked breathlessly.

"Bless you, I'm not attacking him!" Jack laughed. "Curtis was very good company . . ."

"And one of the finest soldiers I've ever met," Bertie interposed, to find himself rewarded with a glowing smile of gratitude. "In South Africa . . ."

"All the same, he was a cad where women were concerned," Jack continued pitilessly.

Her uncontrollable outbreak had frightened Joan; and she now contented herself with suggesting dispassionately:

"I don't know Mrs. Anker; but, if you were married to an unsympathetic wife, Jack, some one who had no love to give and rejected your love . . ."

"My dear, I'd have strangled Beatrice in a *week* if she'd been *my* wife! Anything that came to her she brought on herself. What I meant was, I've always understood Curtis was rather a cad to the women he paired off with."

"Only the women he . . . paired off with . . . can answer that."

The retort was flung back almost before Jack had finished speaking. To Bertie, still hunting for a diversion, Joan's face was transfigured with the desperate courage of the coward; and, seeing the hot anger in her eyes, he realized for the first time what a spell Curtis must have bound on this shrinking, undeveloped girl. He realized, too, that her instinct was sound in warning her that she could never explain herself to Jack's frigidly theoretical understanding:

"I think Joan's right there."

"Oh, they brought it on themselves, of course . . ." Jack began.

"So you mustn't blame Curtis," Joan broke in swiftly. "Brought it on themselves, indeed! Of course they did! We bring nearly all our mistakes and tragedies on ourselves because we're weak, ignorant . . ."

"Human," added Bertie.

"Yes! If we were gods, we should need no for-

giveness. As it is . . . let's *try* to find something decent even in people we disapprove of, Jack. You must assume that a woman is fond of a man before she . . . pairs off . . . with him; when he's killed, she may break her heart for him. Do you realize that she can't . . . hide in the crowd at his memorial service?"

The harnessed passion of three agonizing years surged to Joan's head till she seemed indifferent to her audience and to the future. Where Bertie had expected to find her losing her head in one way, she was losing it in another; and he waited helplessly to see her betrayed into a defiant admission of the secret that had returned, after two years, to obsess her.

"Your views of life are too abstract, Jack, old man," he interposed.

"They're absolutely concrete," Jack laughed. "It's the convention in this part of the world that a man must be content with one wife; if he wants a new wife once a month, he mustn't be surprised if people look at him a bit queerly; and any woman who isn't his wife mustn't be aggrieved if there's no place for her at the memorial service. They've broken the rule and they're paying the penalty; but they knew the rule before they broke it. There's nothing 'abstract' about that."

"It's a little inhuman," Joan sighed. "It makes no allowance for the one thing that may justify you in breaking the rule. And that's love." Jack was preparing a complacent dismissal of love when Joan sprang to her feet and stood over him, trembling and almost forgetful of Bertie's presence. "A little picture, my child! Something called 'love-at-first-sight.' A ball-room . . . anywhere . . . London. A girl

standing by herself . . . on a balcony, say. A man . . . Even before he sees her face he feels . . . giddy, hot-and-cold. . . . *When* he sees her, when their eyes meet . . . Jack, when you know she's the only woman in all the world who means anything to you . . . ?"

"Well?"

"What are you going to do? She's married already."

"That would be a very nasty jar."

"You'd make a polite little bow and walk away?"
Joan asked with rising scorn.

"Something of the kind."

"But if you're in *love* with her . . ."

As Jack pursed his lips and shook his head in smiling deliberation, Joan realized—if she had not known it before—that he had slipped from argument into creed:

"Pardon me, I shouldn't let myself *fall* in love with her. In spite of the giddiness and the hot-and-cold business. Another man's *wife* . . . Thank God, I've enough money to buy myself a ticket to India and enough sense to stay there till I'm out of danger."

Suddenly relaxing, Joan sank back in her chair:

"I believe you really would."

"So would any one who tried to behave like a gentleman!" Jack cried. "My dear Joan, if a man isn't eternally thinking about women, if he keeps in hard condition . . . Which reminds me! I'm supposed to be arranging about tennis! You'll play, Bertie? I'll get hold of Reggie and Frank. The gov'nor and the general can come in after tea."

As he ran, whistling, along the terrace, Joan turned with piteous resignation:

"You heard him, Bertie! What can I do against that? I was trying to tell him then!"

"You can't tell him. Has Sir William said anything?"

"He approves . . . provisionally; but he won't announce anything till Jack's seen my father. . . . Bertie, that girl: I'm *afraid* of her."

"If she knows nothing, she can say nothing."

Short of a preventive war with Isabel, there was nothing more to be done; and Bertie made his way to the tennis-court with a growing sense of exasperated helplessness. When he returned to the house for tea, Lady Keithley announced that Joan was lying down in her room; but, as a new set was being formed, she appeared for a moment and whispered that she must speak to him alone.

A single glance at her tortured eyes admonished Bertie that she had boasted prematurely. Isabel knew everything; it was more than possible that she would say everything.

"It's . . . come," Joan whispered unsteadily as they separated themselves from the tennis-players and returned unseen to the house. "The moment you'd gone. Oh, why did you leave me, Bertie? She glided in—she must have been waiting—and said: 'I haven't congratulated you yet.' " . . .

The narrative was broken by a sob; and Bertie gripped her wrist:

"Yes?"

"I thanked her; she said she was *amazed*. I said that wasn't very complimentary to me; she told me she didn't mean it to be complimentary. I got up to go; she barred the way and said: 'I was amazed that you were able to make them swallow the Curtis Anker epi-

sode.' I told her again that Curtis was the dearest friend I'd ever had. She . . . smiled in a way that made me want to kill her. I tried to hurt her through her vile cousin: I said *I* was the best friend *Curtis* had. She said: 'He was your lover.' "

Joan drew herself up rigid and quivering, then relaxed with a second strangled sob.

"Go on!" urged Bertie.

" 'Yes, he *was*,' I said. . . . Oh, Bertie, I'd denied him once when I came here, pretending to every one that I hadn't been blessed with his love; I denied him when I let Jack slander him; thank God, oh, thank God, I didn't deny him the third time! . . . It was terrible! We fought . . . as only two women *can* fight for one man, . . . pretending we were thinking of him the whole time, . . . as only women can pretend. She called me . . . no, I can't say it! I'd seen it in a book, but I'd never heard it. I *deserved* it: I was arrogant, I taunted her, *knowing* I was what Jack wanted. Then she hit out: he wouldn't want me when he knew what I was like; if I didn't tell him, she would. . . . I said I'd tell him." . . .

Suddenly calming herself, Joan pulled a letter from her belt and gave it to Bertie.

"Am I to read this?" he asked.

"If you like. I want you to give it to Jack when I've gone. No! I promised to shew it her first; and she's to see me giving it him. There was no mercy wasted. . . . She'd seen the report some detective made when her cousin was preparing to divorce Curtis. . . . I wonder she lets me make my own confession; she must know there's just a chance Jack may forgive me if I tell him. And he'd never forgive me if he heard from any one else." . . .

"And what d'you want *me* to do?"

Joan stood with her eyes closed, breathing deeply; then she asked:

"When's the train to Braemar?"

"That's gone hours ago."

"It doesn't matter. There must be a train back to London some time. I want you to send me a telegram saying . . . oh, that my father's been taken ill. I don't care if they believe it so long as they let me go. Will you do that?"

"If it's the best I can do."

"You must go at once. And then you must get Jack out of the way when it arrives. I shall break down if I have another scene; . . . and *he* won't believe I've been sent for."

As Bertie hurried away in the direction of Invercaldy, Joan sank into a chair and waited till it should be Isabel Mordaunt's pleasure to grant her an audience and to approve her confession. At a second reading, the letter was abject enough; the hostile critic would see in it the bald, unromantic history of what had taken place: a girl of good birth and careful education, demonstrably headstrong and now admittedly vicious, young still, even younger when she allowed herself to be seduced. . . . Whispered though unwritten, the word brought a rush of blood to Joan's cheeks. Why must people use filthy words for love, the very purpose of life? And why should she care what people thought or said? Why remind herself of that dreadful woman's coarseness?

Joan sprang to her feet and looked guiltily round the empty room. That was what they *would* say: the reporters . . . and the coroner. Not that it mattered. She could not explain to people who did not under-

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stand. Young girl of good birth, unsettled by the war; the coroner would refrain from commenting on the responsibility of her seducer, who was beyond the reach of human criticism, having indeed (from all accounts) fought and died gallantly in the defence of his country. The coroner would not be doing his duty, however, if he failed to animadvert on the responsibility incurred by the *parents* of such weak, unhappy creatures as the one on whom this inquest was being held. . . .

It was impossible to go on! At first Joan thought that she was laughing at the coroner; then she laughed at herself for imagining, even in delirium, that she would ever find the courage to take her own life. Later, she realized that she was laughing because she could not help herself, because she was mad, because her head and chest were filled with a clockwork machine, wound for perpetual motion. She could only stop it by crying; and, if she cried, she would at once begin to laugh again. And then the top of her head would fly off. Of course, if Bertie were to come, discarding his divine gentleness and gripping her wrists till he hurt her . . . It would make all the difference if some one gripped her wrists; or banged her head against the wall. But these panelled walls would echo too terribly!

Footsteps rang out on the terrace, and she heard her name called.

"Jack, I'm here," she answered. "My dear, you're the very person I want! Look what I've done! I was hunting for some sealing-wax and I shut my hand in this drawer. . . . Gently, won't you? It's all right! It doesn't hurt. I must have pushed the drawer in crooked."

"Sit here while I get some hot water!" Jack ordered.

"Darling, I don't want *anything* . . . except you. I want you to sit and talk to me."

Though she invited him smilingly to the arm of her chair, Joan had to turn and hide the flush of pain which his solicitous tone called to her cheeks. He had come in radiant, as in the spring days when he escaped from his office and raced home to greet her; Joan felt that his expression would haunt her through the endless nights when she had only memories to feed her.

"You *swear* you're not in pain? I've never seen you look like this before!"

"It was a tiring journey last night. And it's rather an ordeal to be shewn off . . ."

"Not when everybody falls in love with you."

"If I thought the love would last! I *know* I'm going to disappoint you. All night, all day I've been thinking . . . wondering how we shall get on, thinking what strangers we are to each other. . . . Darling, d'you realize that the first twenty years of my life are a closed book to you? You've never asked me about them." . . .

"Nothing mattered before we met," Jack answered softly. "I suppose things *happened* to us all the time." . . .

"But don't you want to know anything about me? Since I've seen you here, I've felt that our lives . . . must have been so different. All our ideas . . . What seems natural to one person is utterly wrong to another. We're rather taking each other on trust."

Before he could answer, Jack had to recall the numberless occasions on which he had tried to talk of his life in France and India. Though Joan listened eagerly enough, his own interest flagged because she had not been present to share his experiences.

"I'll answer any questions you like," he promised; "but you'll find it precious dull."

"Oh, *I* wouldn't dream of asking! . . . It's not my business, I've no *right* to know," Joan cried. Her vehemence swung Jack's attention from her complaint, of a moment before, that they were taking each other on trust. "Whatever we did before to-day is our own private affair. And *you've* no right to know what I've done. Have you?"

Bending over her, Jack drew her into his arms:

"As a very great favour, don't ever use the word 'rights' between us, Joanie."

"But you wouldn't *let* me tell you, surely? Jack dear, I'm worried and miserable! *I must* understand this. We think so differently that I couldn't *bear* it if you said: '*You never told me that.*' . . . I warned you I should disappoint you, I'm terribly full of faults; when you said you loved me, you meant that you loved me for what I was, with all my faults. Didn't you? Oh, don't say I have none! That's ridiculous! . . . Jack, I must know what you mean . . . now . . . before it's too late. If I'd committed all the crimes in the calendar, you'd love me just the same?"

As he tried to kiss her again, she escaped from his arms and stood up, waiting for his answer. Jack bit his lip at the rebuff and stared at the ground before he could control his voice and simulate a smile:

"You say you're miserable; certainly you look miserably overwrought and tired . . ." he began.

"Oh, for God's sake don't treat me like a child!" she cried petulantly. "If you *knew* how maddening it was for women always to be told they're 'overwrought,' when they try to talk seriously. . . . Would you love me just the same whatever I might have done?"

"That's . . . hardly reasonable."

"There's no *reason* in love."

"There are some things that would put any one outside the pale."

Joan swept her arms scornfully round towards the distant blue ring of the Invercaldy Hills:

"The pale that you and your people have erected to shut out life."

For a moment Jack felt his head seething with the old fury that had driven him away, on a wild motoring-tour into Wales, for fear of saying something to blast her. Then his heart melted and his eyes grew suddenly moist at the sight of her piteous, tired face. When a fragile slip of a girl confided herself so bewilderingly to the protection of a burly, stolid man, he must try patiently to realize her timidity in coming to a strange house, full of strange people, thence to embark on marriage with one whom, in her own words, she still regarded as a stranger.

"Don't let's drag in my people," he laughed. "Joanie, you're upset; and small wonder. I've honestly no idea what you're driving at." . . .

"It's very simple. You know nothing about me except that I've a father and mother and brothers and sisters; and you've only my word for most of that. I've not chosen to tell you more, but I warned you that I should be unsatisfactory. I'm very unsatisfactory. I don't choose to tell you more now; I don't admit the right of any one to enquire what I was doing before we met. If you loved me for what I am, you wouldn't want to know; you'd love me as much if I came to you with blood dripping from my hands." Could Bertie hear her, he must see that she was following his advice and declaring her terms! Jack waited, frowning; and,

as though she had not made her meaning clear enough, Joan ended with an ultimatum. "I *must* know . . . what love means to you . . . before it's too late."

In the slanting light of the afternoon sun, she saw Jack fighting to keep command of his temper.

"Joanie . . ." His hand stole out and caught hers. "Joanie, do me the justice to remember one thing: I've not asked you anything about yourself, I don't propose to ask you anything about yourself, I trust you implicitly . . ."

"Will you swear to love me as much always, whatever I may have done?"

Jack made a last effort to laugh her out of her solemnity:

"It would strain my affection if I found you torturing animals or mutilating children."

"Whatever I may have done?" she repeated relentlessly.

"It's not in my power to promise that."

"Then . . . you make reservations to your love. I . . . just wanted to know what you meant. We won't talk about it any more now. I . . . I must think what's to be done." . . .

When Bertie returned from Invercaldy, Jack was pacing up and down the terrace with his hands locked behind his back. There had been no time for the bogus telegram to be delivered; and, as Joan could be seen sitting in a raised pavilion above the tennis-court, it was fair to assume that Jack's scowling face had nothing to do with her confession. That, no doubt, would be handed him as Joan stepped into the car; and simultaneously it was Bertie's business to create a diversion and to postpone the inevitable outburst until after her departure.

Before that, however, one last appeal could be launched. If he told Jack to disregard anything that Joan might say or write in a mood of passing hysteria, he would be inviting Isabel to do their work, less tenderly, for them; it was not too much to hope even now, perhaps, that the one disinterested friend of all parties might persuade her to realize the needless catastrophe which she was preparing. After hunting through the house and gardens, he ascertained that she was writing letters in her room; through the locked door she assured him that he was wasting his time in talking to her, but curiosity at length encouraged her to let him in on the promise that he would not stay more than five minutes.

"I'm old-fashioned," she announced: and her imperious tone was in magnificent keeping with her majestic bearing. "I don't like men straying into my bedroom. Lady K. wouldn't like it either. I suppose that must seem very narrow to your enlightened views. However . . . you told me you'd come on Jack's behalf. I expect I know what you're going to say."

"Well, that makes it easier," Bertie answered pacifically. "We'll go into the library, if you like."

"I should prefer that." Isabel glanced, in passing, at a mirror and smoothed her splendid hair with a deliberate hand. "But it's only for five minutes, remember. Well, this woman said she'd been *pleading* with you for her second chance, as she called it. She seems to have done her work very well. Somehow I never thought *you* were the sort of person to let the Keithleys down."

Though Jack could still be seen pacing the terrace, they had the library to themselves; and Bertie closed the door carefully before answering:

"I hope I never shall. Isabel, I know all there *is* to be known, I've thought it over, I've talked to the general; what possible good shall we do . . . ?"

"By telling Jack he's been caught by a woman of the streets? I've a sort of idea that's not the kind of woman he'd want to marry."

"That's not the kind of woman she is! And you know it."

"I know she was Curtis Anker's mistress," answered Isabel wearily. "Who there may have been since . . . or before . . ."

"Oh, my God!"

"You seem to believe anything she tells you . . . when her whole life's a lie. *It is!* She lied when she was living with Curtis; she stole . . . yes, she stole every penny that Curtis spent on her when he ought to have been spending it on Beatrice. She's not in love with Jack. . . . My dear, she *told* me so, and I'm ready to believe it! You see, she can't have it both ways; she defends herself for . . . committing adultery with him by saying it was the one great passion of her life; she can't have a second, so she tells me that Jack fell in love with her and she was so lonely, poor darling, that she allowed him to make a fuss of her." For an instant the scornful mask of weariness was lowered to reveal the bare teeth of hunger. "It doesn't occur to her that *other* people . . . Will you tell me, please, Bertie, what earthly reason she has for running straight?"

"She will; I know her."

Now the expression of weary contempt lingered long enough to transfix Bertie:

"You're half in love with her yourself! If she were unattractive to you . . . like Beatrice . . . You men

are all the same! If a woman has charm, she can drive a coach and four through the ten commandments; if she hasn't, God help her! She can be humiliated as Curtis humiliated my cousin." . . .

"I wonder what you mean by charm," Bertie pondered. "When I look at Joan, I see only a woman whose soul and face have been . . . twisted by pain."

"Charm . . . is the one thing no man is able to resist," she answered with a laugh at his romantic phrasing.

"And the one thing no other woman is able to forgive," Bertie muttered. "Isabel, if you tell Jack, what will be the result?"

"I shall save him from marrying this woman."

"And if this happens to be the one woman he wants to marry? To avenge Beatrice, you're spoiling this girl's life, spoiling Jack's . . ."

"Bertie, you must be mad! I detest Beatrice, she's something unclean to me. And the only person I'd punish would be Curtis . . . as I'd punish any man who allowed a young fool of a girl to make that sacrifice for him. I have *some* idea of justice, you see. You know Jack, you know the way he's been brought up; if he had any idea what this woman was like, he'd never have dared ask his mother to meet her. Or so I think; we'll put it to the test. If he cares for her a thousandth part as much as she makes out, he'll marry her in spite of fifty lovers." . . .

As she glanced at her watch and took a half-pace towards the door, Bertie experienced the embarrassment of a counsel who comes into court with the wrong brief. Expecting to find Isabel in the vulnerable position of an interested but discomfited rival, he could

improvise no case against her when she stood forth as the dispassionate champion of a code.

"Let's deal with realities! If you tell Jack . . ." he began, then paused abruptly as the butler came in with a telegram. "Is that for me, Trender?"

"For Miss Prendergast, sir."

"I don't know where she is. I should think you'd better leave it here; and, if there's any answer, we can send down to the village." Without the reminder of Isabel's conspicuous watch, Bertie realized that his appeal must be cut short. "You've made up your mind to tell him?"

"I'm leaving it to her," was the answer. "Of course, if she refuses . . ."

"When I was asking myself this morning whether he ought to be told, I foresaw that . . . I shouldn't be thanked for my pains."

"I don't want to be thanked," Isabel retorted from the doorway. "I don't suppose Jack or any of you will ever speak to me again. But I'd cut off my hand for Jack. . . . Doesn't *adultery* mean anything to you, Bertie?"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMMANDMENT OF MOSES

"Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?"—ST. JOHN, viii, 10.

AS the door closed behind Isabel, Bertie shrugged his shoulders ruefully and strolled through the window to join Jack on the terrace. Later, as they walked up and down, he saw Joan stealing into the library; at the next turn she had opened her telegram; at the next she was sitting with Bradshaw on her knees, while Isabel stood in the middle of the room, turning the pages of a letter.

"Come for a walk, Jack," Bertie suggested. "I want to have a serious talk with you."

"What's up?"

"Well, you remember when I bored you with questions about what we agreed to call your 'romance' . . ."

"I promised to tell as soon as there was anything to tell," Jack broke in. "I wanted to talk to you this morning, but I had to wait till I'd seen the gov'nor. Assuming you've eyes in your head . . ."

"Is it fixed?"

Jack replied with a startling bark of joyless laughter. In neurotic modern novels he was always reading about girls who seemed to go mad from the hour of their engagements, quarrelling, taking offence, with-

drawing the promises they had just given; from time to time Joan had seemed highly-strung; but, until that hour, he had never imagined that she could make a jealous, unreasonable scene for its own sake.

"Subject to her father's consent . . ." he began. "I think we shall both be better when we've had a decent night's rest, Bertie. You were absolutely right, ages ago, when you told me this sort of thing was apt to get on one's nerves. I've been like a bear with a sore head for the last three weeks, and even poor little Joan is shewing signs of strain. . . . The guv'nor's writing to her father to-night; and I shall go down on appro. as soon as we hear from him."

"I hope with all my heart . . .!" Bertie cried.

Then he paused to stare over Jack's shoulder into the darkening library.

The two girls, in their white blouses and skirts, were standing face to face, arguing passionately. In one hand Isabel clutched a letter, as though she were taking aim with a pistol. Joan slowly raised her hand, hesitated and took the letter, hesitated and dropped it, stared round her like a trapped animal and rushed from the room.

"I . . . couldn't very well say anything to you before, . . ." Jack apologized.

"No! But I want to hear all about it now," said Bertie hurriedly. "Come for a walk."

As Jack looked at his watch, Bertie saw Isabel picking up the letter and staring at it. After a moment of uncertainty, she walked to the writing-table; and the farthest corner of the room shone faintly yellow as she lighted a candle. The colour changed to a white flare as the letter kindled and blazed; a film of shadow dropped on the room as the crumbling ashes floated to

the ground. With a deliberation that reminded him of La Tosca, taking her last leave of Scarpia, she surveyed the room, blew out the candle and disappeared from sight. A moment later, the door shut behind her.

"We shall have to think about dressing pretty soon," Jack yawned.

"Oh, not for a bit. I want to hear the whole story. You see, Joan and I have known each other for years. I'm devoted to her. I've seen her . . . when her luck was out; and I've seen her . . . now. She's one of the sweetest, pluckiest, gentlest, straightest girls I've ever met. I envy you, Jack; I wish I were marrying her myself." . . .

Talking against time and secure in the knowledge that Jack had for months been hungering for a confidant, Bertie led him with a swinging stride farther and farther from the house. Their eyes took no account of the failing light; and it was only when a distant chime floated to them through the still air that Jack thought to look again at his watch.

"I say, it's eight o'clock!" he exclaimed. "We shall be most villainously late."

"Lord! I hope they won't wait dinner for us!"

With a fine show of bustle, Bertie headed for home, contriving, however, to slacken his pace by imperceptible degrees; and, when they reached the house, the others had already finished their fish. Amid a murmur of questions and apologies, Sir William took Jack aside and whispered something that caused him to change colour.

"We've had a little upset while you were away," Lady Keithley confided to Bertie. "Poor Miss Prendergast's father has been taken ill and she's been sent for.

We *hope* it's nothing serious, but two nights running in the train . . ."

"What time did she start?" Jack interrupted.

"As soon as we could pack her things and order the car . . . about ten minutes ago."

"Then she won't catch the eight-forty!" Jack hurried to the door and then turned to his father. "I'll take the little car and see what's happened to her. If she's missed the train, I'll bring her back here till to-morrow morning. If I'm in time, I'll travel up with her . . . Hang it all!" he added indignantly; "I should have thought *one* of you might have offered to look after her."

As he ran from the room, with Sir William and Lady Keithley at his heels, Reggie Bagshot emitted a snort of laughter:

"Oh, my Lord, I'd give something to see their faces if they *do* all meet. It's one of the richest things I've struck."

"I'm afraid I don't see the humour of it, myself," said General Pierrepont tartly.

"But did you get a glimpse of the telegram, sir? Ah, Joan shewed it to me. That's the worst of women: they always overdo their effects. Now, my present step-mother, unlike her predecessor, always tries to kiss me good-night, just to remind me I'm one of the family. As I don't like being reminded of it in that way, I dodge behind the butler and, as my step-mother is shortsighted, it is the butler who is always received into the bosom of the family. Quite unnecessary. . . . So now. If Joan had *read* the telegram *out* to me, I shouldn't have suspected; but, when you see '*Handed in at Invercaldy*,' it's a bit thick."

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Involuntarily, the general glanced down the table; but no one seemed anxious to meet his eyes.

"If you haven't sent yourself telegrams of recall, you'll come to it before you reach my age," he predicted. "And you'll find the best thing is to take them at their face value."

"I can't help wondering whether it *isn't* an elopement after all," Reggie persisted.

"I have a suggestion to make," said Bertie. "You already eat too much and drink too much, Reggie: stick to those forms of excess and don't, in addition, talk too much."

He stopped speaking as the door opened again and Isabel beckoned to him. Until that moment he had not noticed her absence from the table, but a crumpled napkin in one hand suggested that she must have asked to have a tray sent to her room.

"Tell me what you make of this," she ordered, thrusting a letter into Bertie's hand. "One of the maids has just brought it to me."

"By the time you receive this," he read, "I shall have gone; and, if you are sincere in your affection for Jack, you will tell him that it is useless for him to look for me. We made a mistake; it was my fault; and he must try to forgive me. And you, if you have any love for him, must find my letter and destroy it. The only atonement I can make and the only help you can give him—when he wants it most—is to leave his dream unbroken; I can only do that by vanishing from his life. You can say I treated him very badly; and you can explain it all by saying I'm hysterical, mad, anything you like.

"But don't tell him about Curtis. He wouldn't un-

derstand any more than you do. Our love was too big to defend; and this afternoon I was nearly tempted to make excuses for him. I can only thank God that I realized in time."

In the frantic scratching of a blunt pencil, Bertie had difficulty in recognizing Joan's handwriting; and, when he contrasted Isabel's cold composure with the misery and terror which she had inspired in her duel with Joan, he felt a sudden fury that left no room for compassion.

"Yes? Well, . . . I don't know what you expect me to say about it."

"I don't know what to do."

"Why not do nothing . . . for a change? You've spoilt two lives in one day; why not leave it at that?"

"Because that's . . . silly . . . and . . . untrue," Isabel answered with scornful deliberation. "You don't imagine I *enjoyed* it, do you? If it hadn't been for Jack, if he hadn't been everything in the world to me, I simply couldn't have done it."

"Let's hope Jack will be grateful. The only thing now is to do what this wretched girl asks: leave him to imagine that she's mad, anything. Jack will be pretty well raving himself if she really *does* disappear." . . .

"But if he finds her?" Isabel mused.

With one hand to her chin, with her eyes looking over and beyond the present and with her fine brows pensively knitted, she might have posed for a marble statue of justice.

"Oh, my God! You're not going to start this racket again? If he *wants* to marry her . . ."

"I can't let him marry her in the dark."

A taunt rose to Bertie's lips; but, at sight of Isabel's

fanatical determination, he pressed it down. She was clever enough to realize that she was risking a lifetime of Jack's unforgiving hatred; and she was devoted enough to sacrifice herself without thoughts of revenge on the girl who had for a moment succeeded where she had always failed.

"I used to think I knew something about women," he murmured.

"You may do, but you know nothing about me. And you know nothing about Jack. You may call us prigs, puritans, anything you like. That creature hinted that I'd have done what she did if I'd dared. She thought I was envious! 'A woman's morality consists in seeing that no other woman gets more happiness out of life than she does.' Those were her very words, Bertie! I've heard that kind of thing again and again from Beatrice's friends. They explain everything, excuse everything. 'Circumstances alter cases.' 'To understand all is to forgive all.' It's wrong, wrong! *Surely* they must know it's wrong? Ever since I was a child I've been taught certain things. Jack's the same! We never questioned them; they're the great unchanging laws. . . . There are certain things he has a right to expect of his wife, things that every man takes for granted . . ."

Half of the phrases and all the tone sounded like an echo of Jack, himself an echo of Lady Keithley. At any other time Bertie would have ranged himself on their side; but Joan's case could not be tried by ordinary rules. Had Beatrice Anker acted on her vile detective's report two years earlier, Curtis would have been divorced and Joan a widow. It was absurd on one day to label as a sin something that was made praiseworthy by a legal formality. Absurd! And yet

Bertie would have shewn little mercy to any man who offered such plausible arguments to his young sisters. General principles, with an antagonist like Isabel, were to be avoided.

"But what good do you do by upsetting Jack's faith in his wife with stories of something that's dead and done with?" he asked.

"She's not his wife yet. And it's *not* dead and done with! These things leave their mark. . . . If she had some terrible disease, it would be your duty to warn him; and it's just as much your duty when it's a disease of the soul. Oh, Bertie, you *must* see it!"

As he prepared once more to shift his ground, Bertie was thankful that Isabel did not challenge him to begin his charity at home by encouraging his sisters to follow Joan's example.

"But, Isabel," he pleaded, "in the course of your life you must have seen people in love. Don't you know that they cheat and steal and sometimes commit murder? If Jack's really in love, he'll snap his fingers at your great unchanging laws."

He stopped as the Keithleys came into the hall. With a sigh of exhaustion Isabel turned away, leaving him to go back with Sir William to the dining-room.

"When he does that, he won't be the Jack I know," she murmured over her shoulder. "And I . . . I shan't care what happens to him then."

Though an unreal air of detachment still brooded over the room, curiosity was betrayed in a moment of silence when the door opened and all looked up quickly. As a report of some kind was expected, Sir William let fall parenthetically, on their way to the billiard-room, that Jack had returned and would join them as soon as he had changed his clothes. Whether Miss Prender-

gast had caught her train he could not say. The car that had taken her to Invercaldy was not yet returned; and none of the officials could recognize her from Jack's description. As she had a return ticket to Braemar, there was no need for her to visit the booking-office.

"We must assume it's all right," Sir William concluded. "The only thing is about the car." . . .

He paused as Jack put his head in at the door and motioned Bertie to come with him. Then, excusing himself, he hurried out with a whispered enquiry and crossed the hall with one hand on his son's shoulder. In the drawing-room, Lady Keithley was fingering Joan's telegram and talking in an undertone to Isabel. As they entered the room, Jack hesitated for a moment and then asked Bertie how much he knew:

"This is all in confidence, you understand; there's been rather . . . an upset." . . .

"You father was saying . . ." Bertie began.

"Oh, that was eye-wash . . . for the others. You know Joan's bolted?"

"Yes."

"She sent herself a telegram . . ."

"No, I sent it for her. At her request, of course. And I was to manœuvre you out of the way while she escaped."

Though Bertie braced himself to withstand an assault, his balance was disturbed when it came from an unexpected quarter. Jack could not trust himself to speak; but Lady Keithley broke in with indignation that shewed him her friendship was forfeit:

"You knew all the time? Bertie! And you sat there pretending? When you could see that Jack and all of us were scared out of our lives?"

"Joan felt she was in an impossible position, . . ." he answered.

"But why? How?" Sir William demanded.

After a day of muttered consultations and tentative skirmishing, Bertie felt fiercely exhilarated by this open antagonism. Though Isabel kept silence, she was hovering on his flank if he tried to retreat; and the other three were straining to begin their attack.

"Perhaps Jack can throw some light on that," he hazarded. "I was given to understand that there was some difference." . . .

"You were given to understand that we were both suffering from a night in the train!" Jack answered.

"It was more than a question of nerves."

"Did she tell you what the row was about?" Careless of his tone and language, Jack took a pace forward and stood, hand on hip, with outthrust lower lip. "We *did* have a row . . . like a pair of children. Oh, my Lord! It was like a silly-season correspondence: *Should Wives tell their Husbands?* I forget what I said, but we argued backwards and forwards. *Should* a man rake up all his past life? I told her she'd be bored stiff to hear mine. Had you the *right* to be told? I said there could never be any question of rights between a man and his wife. Then there was something or other. . . . She made a personal matter of it and asked me if I should care for her as much if she committed a murder. I told her that would rather strain my affection; and I suppose I said it in the wrong way (I was fed-up), and she was hurt." . . . He paused and then exploded at Bertie, as though he were seeking an outlet for the suppressed irritation of the last twelve months. "For a tuppenny-ha'penny bicker . . . ?"

"But it wasn't." Bertie interrupted. "She had a purpose in her question. And your answer, whatever it was, decided her that she was in an impossible position."

"For God's sake, don't say that again! Joan *was* a bit worked up, I admit, but I know her well enough . . ."

"You may know her better in some ways, but I've known her longer. Am I right in saying that she resisted with all her power for nearly a year? Didn't she tell you she was afraid of disappointing you?"

"That was simply . . . talk!"

"Excuse me, it was *not*. She saw that there were some pretty big differences between her ideas and yours; she belongs to the modern school, and in everything but age, Jack, you belong to an older generation. There are some things she could never make you understand; you'd be disappointed in her, or so she feared. She believed that so strongly that she ran away. And . . . you'll have to face it, I'm afraid, old man: she's not coming back."

Though Jack tried to speak, no sound came; and he swallowed desperately, as though he were choking. Bertie, watching him in fascination, found his arm being caught by Lady Keithley, while Sir William touched his shoulder and tried to lead him away.

{ "I don't understand!"

{ "You must explain what you mean!"

{ "Did she *tell* you this?"

The three voices clamoured simultaneously; and Bertie had almost to shout in the effort to make himself heard above them:

"I'm not in a position to say anything *more*! And we shall do no good by losing our heads!"

"But I don't understand!" Sir William expostulated again. "Differences of ideas? Naturally! *Quot homines . . .* This is not the whole truth, Bertie."

"No. But when people act on their different ideas . . ."

"Be careful!" Jack shouted.

"I've told you I've said all I'm going to say," Bertie answered quietly. "There has been something in Joan's life which she considers her affair only. I know all about it. I think it's wholly to her credit. You might not agree." . . .

"You certainly wouldn't."

Hovering on the flank, Isabel had been forgotten until her calm, assured voice cut through Bertie's patient diplomacy. Jack spun around defensively, as though he were being hemmed in by an ever-increasing circle of enemies:

"So you know about it too?"

"But what is it?" demanded Lady Keithley.

"Something in her life' . . ."

"Something to her discredit?" Jack roared.

For a moment Isabel quailed before his anger; then she exchanged a glance with Bertie and shrugged her shoulders:

"That is . . . a matter of opinion, evidently. I call it . . . an infamy. I warned her that, unless she told you, I would."

"So you drove her away? My God, Isabel . . ." With an effort, Jack controlled himself as the butler came in to announce that the car had returned and that the chauffeur was waiting. Miss Prendergast had not come with it. "I've to thank *you* for this, have I? You drove her away, you say she's not coming back. . . . We shall see about that. I *hope* I find her, for

everybody's sake. If I don't, I'll make you pay for your damned interference." . . .

"But, Jack . . ."

Humble and full of a great amazement, Isabel's voice only lashed him to greater fury.

"Why the hell couldn't you leave it alone?"

"If you *knew* . . ."

"I don't *want* to know! I don't care! If you say anything against her, you'd better look out for yourself! *Who* asked *you* to come butting in? If I don't find her, . . . you'll be sorry you were ever born!"

As the slam of the door echoed and re-echoed through the house, Isabel sank limply into a chair and covered her face. The savagery of Jack's onslaught was easier to bear than his naked repudiation of her love. "My . . . damned interference," she gasped incredulously; and, if Bertie had ever wished to punish her for the misery which she had brought to Joan, he could have devised nothing so annihilating as Jack's furious rebuff.

Sir William made a movement to comfort her, but Lady Keithley drew him aside with the whispered announcement that "this" must be sifted to the bottom. They both looked at Bertie, but his angry, set face did not invite another appeal.

"Until we know . . ." Sir William murmured.

Bertie watched them making uncertainly for the door, in Jack's wake; then he turned to Isabel:

"I don't want to . . . rub it in; but you see! It will only do harm if we say anything more to Jack in his present mood."

"The great unchanging laws," Isabel laughed hysterically. "He's . . . like all the rest of you. I'd put

him on a pedestal, . . . when the simple truth was he'd never been tempted."

Finding no answer, Bertie opened one of the windows and asked if she would care to come into the garden till the Keithleys returned. At first she did not seem to hear him; and he remained with one foot on the sill, looking up at the stars. In the next room, Reggie's voice could be heard calling the score; then the click and whirr of the billiard balls ended and Frank Wharton entered the drawing-room.

Bertie filled a pipe and recalled his fancy, earlier in the day, of a long, varied agony unrolling itself like a cinematograph film.

"Damned fool I was not to send myself a telegram at the same time," he reflected.

Through the unblinded windows of the hall he could see a liveried figure turning its head in response to the alternating examination of Sir William and Lady Keithley; Jack fidgeted for a few moments in the background and then hurried out of sight. In the drawing-room Isabel sat huddled, with her face averted, while Wharton chafed her hand. From the corner of the house, where the drive forked into the stables, came the hoot of a horn; and, as Bertie took up his position at the end of the terrace, he saw Jack driving furiously in the direction of Invercaldy. Once he heard his name called; and, on looking round, he saw Isabel rousing from her trance and recognizing Wharton.

"Where . . . where's every one?" she asked.

"I don't know. . . . I was wondering if you'd like a breath of fresh air," Wharton answered, as Bertie hurried out of earshot.

"I must write one letter first. . . . You needn't go.

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. . . *Please* don't go, Frank: I want you. My head's simply going round and round." . . .

Wharton waited until she had crossed the room to the writing-table and then sat down.

"Has anything been heard of Miss Prendergast?" he asked.

"I don't know. . . . I hope they find her, I hope she doesn't do anything . . . foolish, . . . or they'll say I drove her to it. They'd say I was having my revenge because I couldn't get Jack for myself. It wouldn't be true . . . except that I love Jack more than any one in the world. I always have, I suppose I always shall. That was the moon I was crying for, Frank."

"I . . . never guessed."

"Jack's behaviour would hardly be mistaken for a lover's!" she answered bitterly. "But ever since we were children . . . First of all he ignored me; and now he hates me; and everything I try to do for him makes him despise me more. And I shouldn't care, if I thought I was doing him any good. . . . That's the kind of woman you wanted to marry!"

"You're the woman I still want to marry!"

As he sprang to his feet, Isabel waved him back to his chair:

"I told you that, if I *did* come, I shouldn't wait to be asked. Here I am. . . . But I think you'll be very foolish if you marry me. I've come to you because . . . I'm frightened. I shan't think the worse of you if you change your mind. Of course, I should do my best to make a success of our life. I shouldn't be rude to you, as I am now; I suppose that was my . . . reaction to Jack's indifference. I'm fond of you, Frank, and I should try to make you happy, but I'm

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not in love with you . . . and I come to you when I've been rejected elsewhere."

This time she was powerless to keep him away.

"I will *not* allow you to talk like this!" he cried.

"I believe in making a clean breast of everything. . . . At least, I think I do. And perhaps I want to hurt myself. . . . Yes, let's go out! Every one hates me, I want to escape!"

As she stood up, Wharton raised her hand to his lips.

"Why don't you . . . kiss me properly?" she asked.

"I didn't think you wanted me to."

"It's your right now."

"Perhaps . . . that's why I didn't want to exercise it."

Disengaging her hand, Isabel let her arms fall on his shoulders and allowed herself to be drawn into his embrace.

"I'm sorry I said what I did. You're very generous, Frank," she whispered. "And you've been very patient with me. May I ask one favour?"

"I've told you . . . a thousand times: anything you want!"

"I told you about Jack . . . because I thought you should know. Promise me, oh, *promise* me, Frank, you'll never throw it in my teeth!" . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

ONE GENERATION AND ANOTHER

"Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not like hard life, of laws."

—GEORGE MEREDITH: *Modern Love*.

WHEN Lady Keithley came back to the drawing-room, Isabel had disappeared; and Bertie could be heard playing billiards with single-minded absorption in the next room. Neither absence nor preoccupation, however, was allowed to stand in the way of the interrupted enquiry. Miss Prendergast, the chauffeur reported, had not caught her train; she was staying at the station hotel; and he was late in coming back because she had lost her purse on the road and had kept him driving backwards and forwards to look for it.

Jack was on the way to Invercaldy, sworn to bring her back, if necessary by force, alive or dead.

"And before he comes," Lady Keithley added with resolution, "we *must* clear up all this mystery."

There was a moment's silence in which both witnesses waited for the other to speak first; then Bertie declined the invitation as resolutely as it had been proffered.

"I'm afraid I've said all I *can* say. Except that . . . I'd marry Joan myself, if I had the chance."

"Then there can be no reason for your not telling us."

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In pain and bewilderment, Sir William shook his head and turned to Isabel:

"You see the position we're in. . . . Or rather, I don't think either of you realize it at all: Jack is our only son, he is faced with the most important decision of his whole life; and then we have *this* bomb-shell. You must tell us what it is." . . .

In the shock of her late disillusionment, Isabel transferred to Jack's parents a moiety of her scorn for his feebleness:

"A thing of that kind apparently makes no difference to Jack. He's said so."

"Of *what* kind?" Lady Keithley interposed. "It may make a considerable difference to *us*."

Isabel sighed and looked in Bertie's direction, wondering why she should be bullied while he was discharged after a single blunt refusal to speak. As her mournful eyes met his, he knew that he could count on her silence. The problem changed; and he tried to measure, from their expressions, how much resistance the Keithleys could oppose to Jack. Sir William's mild blue eyes were abnormally bright; his bearing was that of a French aristocrat resisting an incursion of *sansculottes*; Lady Keithley, though nothing could destroy her maternal aspect, was now maternal only in her fierce desire to protect her young. Bertie recalled a premature phrase in which he had ascribed Jack to the older generation; in the new contest he appeared as the prize between his parents and Joan.

"I think both Isabel and I feel," he ventured, "that this is a question you must thresh out with the interested parties."

"You may be sure we shan't dream of giving our consent till we *have*," Lady Keithley answered.

Once again Bertie tried to balance the myriad tiny influences of upbringing with a force which neither Jack nor his parents were yet able to gauge. It seemed to be a battle which both sides were destined to lose.

"Where *you* can help us is in this," Sir William interposed diplomatically: "so long as you won't speak, we're bound to put a very grave construction . . . If you won't do it for our sakes, you might do it for Joan's."

"Jack means to marry her whatever happens," Isabel answered contemptuously, as she turned to the door.

"That . . . is as may be. Am I to understand that, if we knew, we might not approve?"

"If you oppose him, I'm afraid you'll lose him," Bertie added. "No, you wouldn't approve."

"Perhaps we know Jack rather better," Lady Keithley rejoined in a tone of dismissal.

With a slight bow, Bertie returned to the terrace. The sable shadow of the woods above him was punctured with two pin-points of moving light; and in the windless silence he heard the distant beat of an engine. Then Jack's low white car swung into sight and stopped at the hall door. No one got out; to all appearances the car had driven itself; and Bertie was going forward to investigate when he saw Joan beside the driving-seat with Jack leaning towards her. Her coat-collar was turned up to hide her face, but her attitude was unresponsive to his pleading; and, when Bertie came into the light of the head-lamps, she slipped out of the car and ran to him for protection:

"Make him let me go! I didn't want to come." . . .

"I shan't let you go again," Jack announced.

Joan looked at him with a defiance that was new to

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Bertie; then she walked to the door, only turning to ask:

"Where's Sir William?"

"He's in the drawing-room."

"I don't know which that is."

In single file, they walked, blinking in the light of the hall, to the door of the drawing-room. As he hesitated, almost feeling that he ought to knock, Bertie remembered, with absurd incongruity, the days when he was summoned, a shrinking, dry-mouthed boy of nine, to his headmaster's study. Sir William and Lady Keithley were grouped as he had left them; he heard himself murmuring "Here's Joan"; then he tried to escape, only to find that Jack barred the way and that Joan, slipping forward, was defending herself with mingled apology and recklessness:

"I'm sorry to have caused all this upset. And I'm sorry for saying what wasn't true, about the telegram. I'd . . . reached a deadlock; and I tried to get away as quietly as I could. I was brought here by force and I must ask you to make Jack let me go."

The brave words were so little in keeping with her obvious timidity that Sir William abandoned his position as judge to become her advocate:

"My dear young lady, we can't allow our guests to go wandering through the night! When you came here, we incurred a responsibility for you." . . .

"But I'm used to staying in hotels by myself."

"Don't you feel *you* have a responsibility to *us*?" Lady Keithley broke in.

"Oh, I've behaved abominably. I can't defend myself."

"Are we not entitled to an explanation? When Jack brought you here this morning . . ."

"Was it . . . only this morning?" Joan whispered in amazement. "Ah, but everything's changed since then, I'd made a mistake."

Again Bertie tried to escape from a discussion in which he had no part; but Jack once more barred the way.

"Won't you tell us what has happened since this morning?" Sir William asked persuasively.

"I found . . . Jack didn't care for me as much as I thought." . . .

"Joanie, that is . . . *not* true," Jack interrupted.

"You made conditions."

"But no one in his right mind could take that nonsense seriously! Would *you* think the same of *me*, whatever I might do?"

"I said: 'Whatever—I—had—done.'"

The deliberate, incisive tone cleared the air like a rush of cold wind. There was no longer room for petulance on Jack's part nor for outraged maternity on his mother's. Anything seemed better than suspense; they were weary of pretending and shirking, though Sir William, with his hatred of scenes, persevered for a moment longer with his courteous make-believe:

"You are not trying to persuade us that you've done anything *very* dreadful."

"I've nothing to regret, nothing to be ashamed of," Joan answered proudly.

"Then *why* . . . ?" Lady Keithley began in amazement.

"Ah, but who is to judge? If I kill an enemy in war I'm heroic, patriotic; if I kill him in peace, I'm a murderer. It's the same act."

"Don't you think Jack's parents have a right to judge?"

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To Bertie's wondering eyes, Joan seemed to grow in dignity and stature; her face took on calm, new courage from the steady attack of her persecutors; if Curtis had been by her side to whisper encouragement, her voice could not have been more assured:

"I admit *no* one's right to judge me! *Now* may I go?"

Jack had unknowingly edged forward from the door; but, as Joan half turned, he stepped back and gripped the handle.

"Do you . . . want to go?" he whispered.

In making her last stand, Joan had allowed her voice to rise; her carriage was defiant; and the antagonism which she felt all round her evoked a manner of undisguised antagonism in reply. Jack, like the rest, had become bright-eyed and excited; she remembered their passage in the car from Invercaldy and braced herself to overcome his physical resistance. The unexpected whisper was a prayer and a reminder: she recalled the unnumbered nights when she had sat on a cushion by his chair murmuring drowsily: "Darling, I *must* go now." . . . "Do you *want* to go? *Five* minutes more." . . .

Joan found herself without power of speech, almost without power of movement. If Jack would only take her in his arms, carry her away from these people who were browbeating her!

"I . . . don't," she answered unsteadily. "When I found the train had gone, I drove backwards and forwards, pretending I'd lost something, *praying* you'd come after me. . . . But that was weakness! And I've got over that."

"And when I did come?"

"You *still* made conditions."

"I should still hate you if you did anything mean or cruel. But you couldn't. . . . I've not asked you to tell me anything. I don't want to know. If you told me it *was* something to be ashamed of, I shouldn't believe you. Isn't that enough?"

"For me, yes."

Joan glanced at Lady Keithley and sighed helplessly. After a moment's silence, Jack slowly unbuttoned her coat and slipped it off her shoulders:

"I'm going to order you some food. You heard my father say he couldn't allow you to go wandering off by yourself through the night. To-morrow, if you like. . . . But, if you go, I shall go with you. Take your things off. And give me your word of honour you won't try to bolt again."

When Joan came down five minutes later, Bertie was in the hall; and she was taken into the dining-room without waiting for Jack.

"Isabel Mordaunt gave me a sort of message for you," Bertie told her. "I don't know what's going to happen with the Keithleys, but you need have no fear of *her*. There was a pleasant little scene when Jack found you'd gone; and I think that convinced Isabel that nothing in heaven or earth would keep him from following you. It's not worth your while to tell Jack things that he'll never understand. I wanted you to this morning; but I was afraid then that, if you didn't, some one else might. That's a risk you needn't fear now. And you needn't fear that Beatrice will give you any trouble: she's in a very delicate position herself. Isabel didn't tell me what it was, but she has a hold of some kind over her. I shouldn't try to thank her, if I were you: she's doing this for Jack's sake."

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Joan sat in silence, eating whatever Bertie put before her and from time to time looking towards the door. Jack had been away a quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour. She had almost infinite faith in him, but he was fighting single-handed against the two people whom he had always obeyed hitherto, fighting against the habit of obedience and his own instincts, fighting against their past teaching and present reasoning. Sir William, no doubt, was asking him what *he* would do if his son wished to marry a girl who refused to clear herself. And, when argument failed, Lady Keithley would have recourse to sentiment.

"Bertie, I must see what's happening!" she cried.

"I don't suppose you'll do any good. I've always felt this had to come. It's one generation against another; it's . . . this place against the rest of the world." . . .

"A house divided against itself. . . . He's all they have; and I know, from the way he talks about them, what they mean to him. . . . Bertie, I *can't* break it all up!"

"What can you do? If the Keithleys had any conception . . ."

"I must see what's happening," she repeated.

In the drawing-room she found Jack standing with his back to the fire, stubborn and silent. Sir William, as she had pictured him, was leaning forward from the edge of his chair, reasoning blandly with smiles and fluttering movements of his hands, while Lady Keithley nodded approval at each stage of the argument. All three looked round, as the door opened; and Jack's expression became artificially suave.

"I say, I hope Bertie looked after you all right," he

began. "I meant to come with you, but we got talking." . . .

Joan walked without trepidation into their midst and looked from one face to another. An inclined mirror over the fireplace threw back her reflection; and she was startled to see how young and frail she looked with her big, tired eyes, her pinched face and tossing aureole of hair. Her life was so full, her understanding so complete, her sense of values so nice, by comparison with these people who were all really older. . . . Until that evening she had depended on the support and advice of others, accepting their standards and leaving them to mould her life; but the evening had brought her to a point where she had to decide for herself. Resolution; courage. They were qualities she expected to acquire as little as she expected to add a cubit to her stature; but circumstances forced her to be clear-sighted, and self-respect impelled her to be brave. *"I admit no one's right to judge me!"* On that word, her spirit was set free; she could look back on her life with equanimity and expect to be pardoned much because she had loved much and suffered more.

And courage was its own reward: she had won Jack.

Looking from face to face, she saw Bertie rubbing his chin in perplexity; and his expression conjured up a night when she had discussed first principles of ethics with him. Cruelty, one of them had said, was the only sin for which there was no forgiveness. In the flush of her new ascendancy she wondered whether she was not being cruel to these haggard, anxious people whose son she was stealing. It was an old dilemma. On the day when she discovered Jack to be in love with her, she had realized that some one must be sacrificed: Curtis, or she, or he, or his parents;

and she was at Invercaldy at that moment because she had always shrunk from sacrificing herself. Now, God be thanked, she feared nothing!

"Jack . . . I've been thinking. It's eleven o'clock, and I must know whether I can stay here. I'm . . . not going to set you against your people."

"My dear young lady, you're going to stay here, if we have to keep you here by force," answered Sir William with a forced laugh. "The difficulty, if you'll allow me to say so . . ."

"Oh, I know! I'll tell you frankly: I've done something that would have kept Jack from ever asking me here if he'd heard about it. Isn't that right, Bertie? And I tell you—on my honour, if you believe I have any—that I'm proud of it. It's not shameful if you can't *make* me ashamed! But I don't think any of you'd understand it."

After an interval of silence Sir William once more adopted the smile and tone of a peace-maker.

"Can *you* understand the difficulty Jack's parents are in? I should find it very hard to believe any ill of you; and I can assure you that you won't find us unsympathetic." . . .

Without answering, Joan walked to the writing-table. Her pen scratched for a moment; and she came back, folding a sheet of note-paper into a thin spill.

"The biggest thing in my life; . . . and it goes into two lines," she murmured.

Jack stared long at the note without unfolding it; then he asked:

"What am I to do with this?"

"Whatever you like." In a whisper that was half taunt and half confession, she added: "If I'd given

you that a year ago, you'd never have asked me to marry you."

Jack looked from her to the note and moistened his lips.

"Things have changed a bit in the last year," he answered at last. "Joanie, what d'you *want* me to do?"

"Whatever you like!" she repeated.

"Come! That's frank and straightforward," said Sir William encouragingly.

As Jack still hesitated, Lady Keithley put out her hand.

"Isn't this a matter between Jack and me?" asked Joan. "It's not a thing I want discussed. . . . Jack will keep it to himself, I know."

All three tried to speak at once, but Jack's voice prevailed over the others:

"Do you want me to read this?"

"If you think . . . you've learnt understanding."

"I don't see what that has to do with it. If you *want* me to read it, I will; but I've never asked you to tell me anything you preferred to keep to yourself and I'm not going to begin now. Nothing you could tell me would make the slightest difference; and . . . I can't allow any one to ask you questions you don't want to answer."

The note fluttered into the fire, and he ground it into the coals with one heel. Joan tried to speak, but could only sob:

"Thank you, Jack."

Sir William was the first to recover. Without committing himself by word or sign, he looked at his watch and whispered to Jack:

"You must have something to eat, you know."

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"I'm quite ready for it. Will you come and talk to me, Joan?"

For an instant they stood in pairs, like opposing armies; then Joan went up to Lady Keithley and touched her hand:

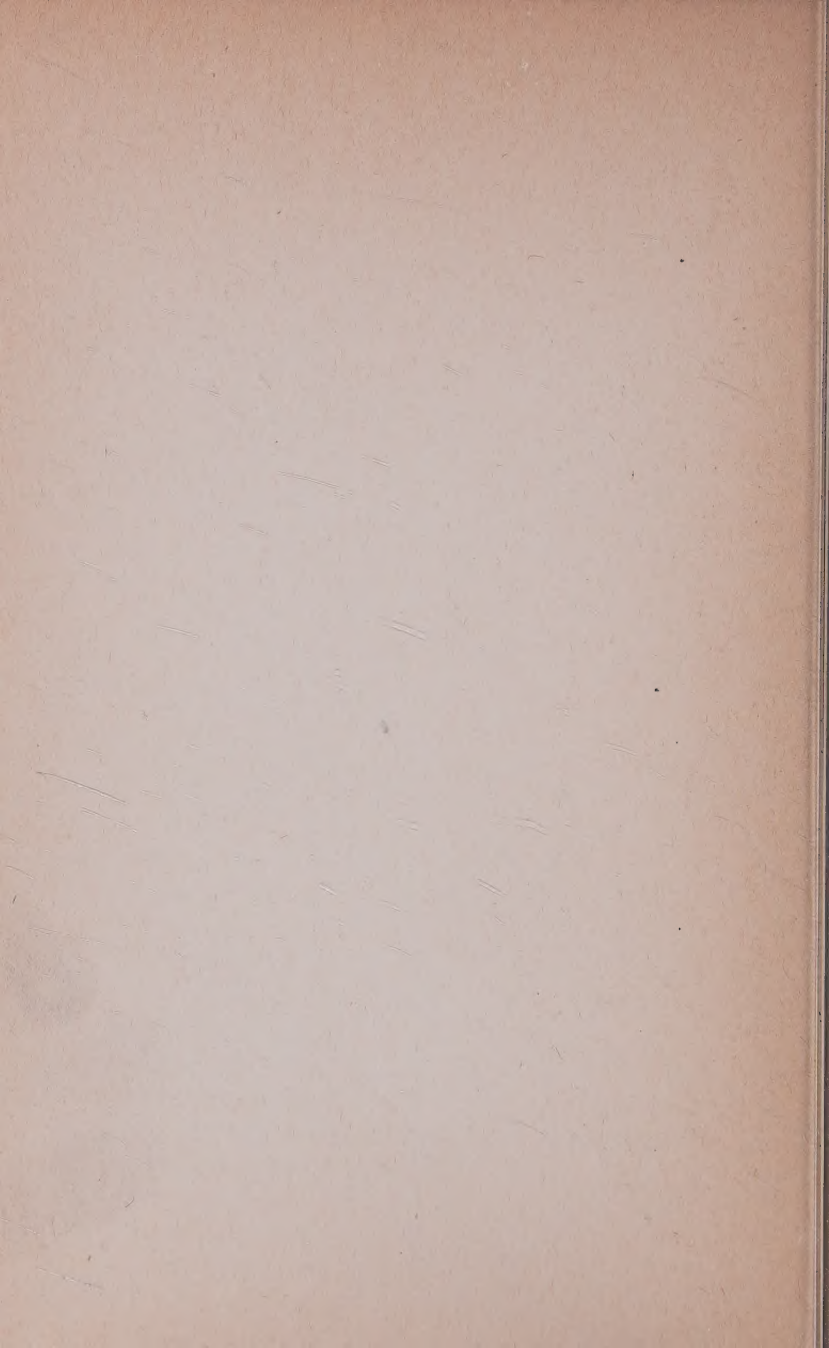
"Won't you come too?"

"Let's all go in," Jack proposed. "Eleven o'clock! The others will be wanting a drink."

After a struggle that caused her to bite her lip, Lady Keithley slipped her arm through Joan's.

"You're sure we shan't be in the way?" she asked.

THE END



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